THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN A MOTOR CAR

LAURA LEE HOPE

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"TOPPLED FROM THE TREE, ALMOST IN FRONT OF THE CAR."

The Outdoor Girls in a Motor Car. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 13.)

The Outdoor Girls In A Motor Car

OR

THE HAUNTED MANSION OF SHADOW VALLEY

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS OF DEEPDALE," "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AT RAINBOW LAKE," "THE BOBBSEY TWINS," "THE BOBBSEY TWINS IN IN THE COUNTRY," ETC.

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN A MOTOR CAR

CHAPTER I

OUT OF A TREE

"COME on, girls, the car is here, and this time I'm going to run it myself!"

"You never are, Mollie Billette!" exclaimed Grace Ford, as, with three companions, she hurried to the window of the library of the Billette home, and looked out toward the street, up which was coming a luxurious touring car of the latest model.

"Aren't you afraid?" asked Amy Stonington, as she looked admiringly at Mollie, whose cheeks were flushed with excitement.

"Oh, it simply gives me the creeps to think about it!" added Grace.

"I don't see why," spoke Mollie, as the car, in charge of a demonstrator, came to a stop in front of her house. "I've taken enough lessons, the garage man says; I have my license, and why shouldn't I run my car? Are you afraid to come with me?"

"No—no, it isn't exactly that," said Amy, slowly, as she fastened the strings of her new motoring hood—all the girls had them, and very becoming they were. "It isn't exactly that, Mollie, but you know——"

"If you weren't afraid to go with Betty in her motor boat, I don't see why you should be afraid to come with me in the car," went on Mollie. "Oh, what did I do with my goggles?" she asked, as she hurriedly looked about the room, lifting up a pile of books and papers on a table. "I know I had them, and——"

"Look!" exclaimed Betty Nelson with a laugh. "Dodo and Paul are trying to pull them apart. I suppose they think the goggles are big enough for two," and she pointed to where the twins, Mollie's little brother and sister, were seated on the velvety lawn, both having hold of a new pair of auto goggles, and gravely trying to separate the two eye pieces.

"The little rascals!" cried Mollie, though she, too, had to join in the laughter of her chums. "Paul!" she called. "Dodo! Come here this instant with my goggles!"

The children looked up, their dispute forgotten.

"Us hasn't any doddles—us got tecticals!" exclaimed Paul.

"Well, those are sister's spectacles—to wear in the auto so the dust won't get in her eyes," explained Mollie, as she approached the twins "Give them to sister."

"Oo et us wide in tar us dive um to oo," stipulated Dodo, holding the goggles behind her back.

"Not to-day, pet," said Mollie, sweetly—compromisingly.

Dodo arose, and backed away, limping slightly, for she was not quite recovered from a recent operation as the result of a peculiar accident. She held the goggles out of reach, and, walking with her eyes fixed on her sister, she was in danger of stumbling.

"She'll fall and break them," cried Grace.

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Mollie. "Come, Dodo, give the glasses to sister."

"Her dive um for tandy!" cried the crafty Paul, seeing a chance to make capital out of his little sister's strategic move. "Us dive oo glasses for tandy; won't us, Dodo?"

"Us will," assented Dora—or Dodo, as she was almost universally called. "Us dive for tandy—lots of tandy."

"The little rascals," laughed Mollie. "I wish I dared rush at her and take them away. But she might fall——" and with the recollection of what little Dodo had suffered, Mollie gave up

her plan of action. The chauffeur tooted on the auto horn, as much as to say:

"Come, I'm waiting for you."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Mollie. "Have any of you——"

"Grace, will you kindly oblige?" asked Betty, with a laugh. "Surely you are not without chocolates on this momentous occasion."

"I don't see why you assume that I always have candy," remarked the tall, slender girl, whose willowy figure added to the charm of her face, framed in a wealth of light hair.

"Oh, we know your failing," laughed Betty. "Come, Grace, you are delaying the game, and if we are going for an auto ride with Mollie—let—let's have it—over with."

"Well, I like the way you speak!" exclaimed Mollie, rather sharply—Mollie had a failing in her quick temper. "If you girls are afraid to come in my new car, just because I'm going to steer all alone, why——"

"Oh, Mollie, I didn't mean it that way at all!" protested Betty. "I just didn't want Grace to feel——"

"Where is tandy?" demanded Paul, as he approached his little sister, evidently with the intention of again assuming the dispute over the

goggles in case no confectionery was forthcoming.

"Grace, have you any?" asked Mollie, beseechingly. "We *must* get started, and the day is so fine we don't want to miss any of it. Paul —Dodo—don't you dare break my glasses!" She shook a warning finger at them.

"I just *happen* to have some chocolates," said Grace, with an air of injured dignity. From the pocket of her sweater she produced a small box, and held it out to Dodo. The child, with a glad cry, dropped the goggles on the grass and sprang for Grace. Paul, too, joined in the race, and while Mollie picked up her recovered property the twins, with a new matter to contend about, gravely sat down on the lawn, and proceeded to divide the candy.

"Now come on!" cried Mollie, "before something else happens. Be good children!" she cautioned them, "and don't go away."

"No," they chorused, while Paul added:

"Bring us more tandy—not bery much here."

"Which speaks well for the appetite of Grace," murmured Amy.

"Oh, let me alone!" protested Grace, with as near a show of temper as she ever indulged in. Mollie looked at her and remarked:

"You're getting my complaint, Grace dear."

"Well, I'm tired of always having candy thrown in my face—what if I do like chocolate?"

"You should have thrown the candy in her mouth—not in her face," laughed Betty, and then Grace smiled instead of frowning, and the four chums—the Outdoor Girls, as they had come to be called from living so much in the open—walked across the lawn to the waiting car.

"It certainly is a beauty!" declared Grace, as her eyes, and those of he rfriends, took in all the details of the auto. "Mollie, you are a lucky girl, and so is Betty with her motor boat. Amy, I wonder what good fortune is coming to us?"

"It will have to be an airship in your case, Grace," said Mollie. "One boat and one car is enough. You had better pray for an aeroplane."

"Never!" assented Grace. "The land and water are enough for me."

"And as for Amy," said Betty, "she wants a balloon, perhaps."

Amy shook her head, and a strange look came over her face. Her chums knew what it meant—that above everything else she would have preferred having the mystery of her identity solved.

"Well, if we're going to mote—let's mote!" exclaimed Mollie, perhaps with a desire to change the subject. "I'm going to take you for a nice long spin."

"Aren't you nervous—to think of being at the wheel without some one beside to help you in case of emergency?" asked Betty.

"Were you, in the *Gem?*" retorted Mollie.

"A little, but then, you know, a motor boat doesn't go as fast as a car—somehow you seem to have a better chance in case of collisions, or accidents."

"There aren't going to be any collisions or accidents," declared Mollie, with conviction. "I'm going to be careful until I get a little more accustomed to it, and then——"

"You'll scorch, like all the others, I suppose," put in Amy.

"Never! Now, who's going to ride with me on the front seat?"

For a moment no one answered—Betty, Grace and Amy looked at one another, and then they burst into laughter.

"Well, do you want to draw lots for it?" inquired Mollie, with a trace of sarcasm. "I thought you'd feel honored."

"I will!" exclaimed Betty. "But you will be careful; won't you, Mollie dear?"

"Of course. I'm no more anxious to get into trouble than you are. Oh, what did I do with my handkerchief?"

"It's up your sleeve," said Grace, indicating a bulge in Mollie's sweater.

"Well, come on!" exclaimed the owner of the new car.

"She says it as though she were—going to—jail!" laughed Grace.

The demonstrator had alighted from the car, and was looking it over, testing the tires with his hand.

"Is it all right, Mr. Ransom?" asked Mollie, a bit anxiously. "Is anything the matter?"

"Not a thing, Miss Billette," he replied. "It is in perfect order. And I'm sure you can run it alone very easily. You have had a number of lessons, and you learned very quickly."

"If only I remember to let out my clutch before I change gears," Mollie murmured.

"Oh, you'll remember that," returned the chauffeur, to give her the confidence he saw she needed.

"I'll remind you of it," volunteered Betty.

The girls got into the car, and the man, impressing a few important facts on the pretty girl driver, lifted his cap as Mollie pressed the button of the self-starter.

"Here we go!" cried Grace, as the motor throbbed and hummed.

Carefully Mollie threw out the clutch, and slipped in first speed. Then releasing the clutch pedal gradually she felt the car move slowly forward. A flush of pleasure came to her face; for, though she had several times performed this feat of late, the demonstrator had always sat beside her. Now she was doing it alone.

"Fine!" cried Betty, as the car gathered speed.

"You're all right!" Mr. Ransom called after the girls.

From first to second gear, and then in another moment to high, was performed by Mollie without a hitch. Then she advanced the spark and gas levers.

"Well, so far—so good!" spoke Amy, with a sigh of relief.

"I knew Mollie could do it," declared Betty. "Look out for that wagon, my dear," she cried, a second later.

"I see it," and Mollie gave it such a wide berth that she sent her car needlessly to the grassy part of the country highway that led out of Deepdale.

"I don't want more than my half of the road," good-naturedly called the farmer who was driving the horse-drawn vehicle. "If all motorists were

as generous as you there'd be no complaints," and he smiled and lifted his cap.

"It's better to be sure than sorry," said Mollie. "Well, girls, how do you like it?" and she ventured to turn around for an instant to speak to Grace and Amy in the tonneau.

"It's scrumptious!" declared Grace, between bites at a chocolate.

"Lovely," chimed in Amy.

"However did you prevail on your mother to get you the car?" asked Betty.

"Well, you see, when poor papa died," explained Mollie, as she put on a little more speed, "he provided in his will that on my seventeenth birthday I should have a certain sum of money to use just as I pleased—within reason, of course.

"He didn't say what it was for, but he had suggested that I take a trip to Europe. But I want to do that later, when I can better appreciate what I see, so I asked mamma if I couldn't use the money for a car, and she allowed me to. The result—you now behold," and she patted the steering wheel.

"We do more than merely behold it," said Grace. "It was sweet of you to ask us for a spin."

"Why wouldn't I, when Betty has been hav-

ing us off on a criuse in her motor boat?" replied Mollie. Then she cried: "Oh, dear! There's a dog!" for one was in the road ahead.

"He can't bite us—up here," said Betty. "Unless you are afraid of your tires."

"No, it isn't that, but I'm afraid I may run over him!"

However, the dog leaped away from the road, darted into an open gateway, and from behind the safe vantage of the fence barked at the passing auto.

"I don't mind you there," said Mollie, with a sigh of relief. "Oh, but isn't this lovely!" and she inhaled deeply of the flower-scented air. There had been a shower the night before, and the roads were in excellent condition. Mollie had had the car about two weeks, and had taken several lessons in driving. As the chauffeur had said, she had proved an apt pupil, and now, being fully qualified, as her license stated, to run it alone, she had, on this first occasion, invited her friends for a run.

For several miles the girls rode along, enjoying to the utmost the swift, silent and easy motion, and drinking in the sweet air. They admired the views, too, for though they had been out with Mollie when she was taking her lessons, they had been so much occupied with

watching her attempts to steer, and listening to the man's instructions, that they had not fully appreciated the beauty of the country through which they passed. And the country about Deepdale was beautiful.

"Are you going out Shadow Valley way?" asked Betty, as Mollie successfully made a turn into another highway, off the main one.

"No, not this time, though we must go there some day. I thought we'd motor to Farmington, and go home by way of Skillman."

"That's a nice way," said Grace. "Here, Mollie, open your mouth," and, as her chum did so, Grace inserted a chocolate, for Mollie had not yet enough confidence to take her hands from the steering wheel, except to shift gears, with the right.

They were going along a well-shaded road now, the big maples on either side meeting in an arch of green overhead. Some of the branches were so low that care had to be taken in passing under them, as Mollie had the top of the car up for protection.

As they approached one immense and ancient tree they saw a flutter of white amid the branches near the ground.

"What's that?" cried Betty.

"Look out!" exclaimed Grace.

The white object—large and fluttering—toppled from the tree, almost in front of the car, and with a little scream of fear Mollie gave the steering wheel such a sudden twist that the auto swerved and nearly upset. Across the road it shot on two wheels, and crashed into the bushes and briars that lined the highway.

Instinctively Mollie jammed on the brake, and threw out the clutch, the next instant shutting off the power, but so suddenly did she stop in the excess of her zeal that Grace and Amy were thrown from their seats, and Betty had to put out her hands to avoid hitting the wind shield.

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE GIRL

MOLLIE was the first to recover herself. Her position at the steering wheel had given her an advantage, in that she had something to hold to, and so was not tossed about as were her chums when the auto came to such a sudden stop.

"Oh, dear!" Mollie exclaimed, ruefully. "Are any of you hurt?"

She gazed back at Grace and Amy, having assured herself by a look at Betty beside her that the latter bore at least no visible injuries.

"I bumped my elbow—on the funny bone," said Grace.

"This is far from being funny," went on Mollie, half hysterical now.

"Stop it!" commanded Betty, getting control of her nerves, and then taking the situation in hand, as she so often did. "No one is hurt, and the car doesn't appear to be damaged, unless the stopping of the motor indicates that."

"No, I shut it off," said Mollie. "Amy, how about you?"

"Oh, I'm all right. But what in the world happened?"

In concert they all looked back toward the big tree, which, to avoid hitting something that fell from it, Mollie had steered away from so suddenly, and with such unexpected results.

"Why—why, it's a—girl!" gasped Betty, as she saw a huddled figure lying on the thick grass at the foot of the maple. "It's a girl, Mollie!"

"Oh, my, I hope we didn't hit her!" gasped Mollie. "I'm all in a tremble. Betty—I'm—I'm going to——"

"Don't you dare say faint!" commanded Betty. "Come, we must see what is the matter. Poor thing!"

"Oh, if—if we struck her!" gasped Mollie.

"I don't see how we could have," declared Amy. "You steered out too quickly."

"Yes, she did steer out quickly, all right," asserted Grace, rubbing her tingling elbow. "Why, Amy, your forehead is all bruised!"

"Yes, my head hit the robe-rail I guess," said Amy. "But that isn't anything. Oh, let's hurry to that poor girl."

Leaving the auto where it was, half-way through a patch of briars and brambles, the four girls approached the quiet figure lying under the tree. They looked up and down the road in case

help would be needed, but not a person or vehicle was in sight.

"Oh—oh! I'm—I'm afraid to—look," spoke Mollie, shrinking back, as Betty bent over the figure of the strange girl. The latter's eyes were closed, and her loosened hair was in a mass about her head—even tossed as it was the girls could see there was a wonderful wealth of it. Betty gently pushed aside the locks from the forehead, and, as she did so she started back. Then bravely repressing her feelings she said:

"It's a cut, but it doesn't seem to be very deep."

"Oh, the blood—the blood!" murmured Mollie, putting her hands before her eyes. "And —I—I did it!"

"Nonsense! Stop it!" cried Betty. "Perhaps you did not do it at all—it may have happened in the fall."

"She is unconscious," said Grace.

"Yes, and we must get her to a doctor, or bring a doctor here as soon as possible," spoke Betty. "I think we can get her to a doctor more quickly. Will your machine run, Mollie? Can you operate it?"

"Oh, it will run all right. Nothing is broken, I'm sure of that. But I——"

"You've just *got* to run it," declared Betty, firmly, "even if it only crawls. Now if we can

find some water to bathe her head we can tell how badly she is hurt. Girls, look for a spring. One of you bring me a lap robe."

Thus Betty issued her orders, and while the girls are preparing to lend aid to the injured stranger I will take a moment of your time—my new readers—to explain briefly some facts about the characters of this story.

In the first book, entitled, "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale; Or, Camping and Tramping for Fun and Health," I told how Mollie, Betty, Amy and Grace, four girls of Deepdale, a town in the heart of New York State, organized a little club for camping and tramping. They went on a tour of about two hundred miles, stopping at night with friends or relatives, and on that tramp they solved a queer mystery having to do with a five hundred dollar bill—solved it very much to the satisfaction of a certain young man.

In the second volume, called "The Outdoor Girls at Rainbow Lake; Or, the Stirring Cruise of the Motor Boat *Gem*," I related what good times the girls had when Betty's uncle gave her a fine gasoline craft. Stirring times the girls had, too, when there was danger from a burning hay barge; and jolly times when they took part in races and went to dances. That Mollie's little sister Dodo was in distress because of a pe-

culiar accident, which involved Grace, and caused the loss of valuable papers, detracted somewhat from the happiness of the girls for a time.

But in the end a "ghost" led to the finding of the missing documents, and Dodo was cured, so that all came out right. Then had followed more delightful times cruising and camping, and now, with the advent of fall, and Mollie's touring car, more glorious times were in prospect. The girls had not been long back from Rainbow Lake when Mollie received her auto.

I might mention that Betty Nelson was the daughter of a wealthy carpet manufacturer, with a large plant near Deepdale, while Mollie Billette was one of three children, her mother being a widow. Little Paul and Dodo I have already mentioned. Grace—the "Gibson girl," as she was often called, had a peculiar longing for sweets, and not being stinted as to pocket money —her father being a wealthy lawyer—she indulged her taste rather too much, so some of her friends thought.

There was a mystery about poor Amy Stonington, for the details of which I must refer my readers to the first book. Sufficient to say that since a baby she had been cared for by her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. John Stonington. Amy had lived in the West, and had been rescued from

a great flood when an infant. What became of her parents, or her brothers or sisters—if she had any—no one seemed able to say. In a way this mystery embittered Amy's life, but she was of too sweet and good a disposition to allow it to make a difference with her friends.

The four girls had been chums since grammer school days, being now High School students. In addition to the "inseparables," as they were often called, my former readers will recall Will Ford, the brother of Grace; his chum, Frank Haley, and another friend, Allen Washburn, now a young lawyer, with whom Betty—but there, why should I give away Betty's little secret?

Quite in contrast to these boys was Percy Falconer, a rather floppish lad, who greatly admired Betty—as who did not? But as for Percy—Betty did not care for him in the least. She was too fine a character to permit herself to be really angry at him, but Betty and Percy never could get along well.

"Dear Deedpale," as the girls alliteratively referred to it, was a charming country town, nestling in a bend of the Argono River, which, some miles below the village, widened out into Rainbow Lake. It was on this lake that the girls had cruised, and had such fun, and Betty's

boat was now docked in the new house constructed for it near Mollie's home. The girls lived within short distance of one another, and were continually visiting, or calling back and forth. Where you found one you would find the others, and their parents used to say they never knew when to expect their daughters home to meals—for they were like one family in respect to dining out.

And, as usual, this beautiful summer day found the girls together in the auto, when the accident had thrown them into such consternation.

"Did you find any water?" called Betty, who had made a pillow of the lap robe, and supported on it the head of the unconscious girl.

"Yes," answered Mollie, her hand trembling as she extended a collapsible cup of the fluid she had dipped from a nearby spring, "I'll get more when she takes that."

"I'm afraid I can't get her to take much of it," said Betty. "But I can bathe the cut and see how large it is."

She tried to get a little water between the lips of the strange girl, while Amy and Grace held her head up; Mollie, with another cup provided by Betty, going off after more water.

"She took a little," whispered Grace.

The girl turned her head to one side as though to avoid drinking. Then she muttered a few words.

"What did she say?" asked Amy.

"I couldn't understand it," answered Betty.

Again the stranger murmured something, and this time the girls caught:

"No, no! I will not go back to him! Anything but the life I have been leading. Oh, why must I do it? Why?"

There was pathetic pleading in the words.

"There, my dear, you will be taken care of," spoke Betty, soothingly. "We will take you to your friends."

"I—I have none! Oh, I can't go back to—him!"

Her eyes did not open, and she appeared to be in a delirium.

"Poor thing!" said Amy, softly. "Bathe her head, Betty."

"Yes, I think that will be better than trying to force her to drink." Dipping her handkerchief in the water Betty wiped away the blood from the cut. It was seen to be a small one.

"That ought not to make her unconscions," said Betty. "More likely she has some additional injury; possibly a blow on some other part of her head. Girls, did you ever see such glori-

ous hair!" Betty caressed it. Truly there was a mass of it, and it was of beautiful silkness and softness. It was still partly bound up, but the autoists could easily tell that it must reach almost to the ground when the girl stood up.

"What in the world could she have been doing up the tree?" asked Grace, as Mollie came back with more water.

"It is the oddest thing," agreed Betty, bathing the stranger's face and wrists.

"Are you sure we didn't hit her with the auto?" asked Mollie, tremblingly.

"I am almost sure you did not," spoke Betty, positively. "As she started to fall you steered out. She just toppled to the ground. See, there is not a mark of dust on her dress, as there would be if the tires had struck her."

"Yes, but perhaps the mud guard, or——"

"But her dress isn't torn or much disarranged. No, Mollie, the auto never struck her, of that I'm sure. But possibly she fell on her head, and the blow and shock stunned her. Oh, we must get her to a doctor!

"Come, girls," went on Betty, "we can lift her into the auto, I'm sure, and take her to the nearest house. Then we'll go for a physician."

"Try to arouse her, first," suggested Mollie. "I can't bear to see her—this way."

Betty used more water, and succeeded in getting some between the pale lips of the girl, but to no purpose. She was limp and half senseless, though she continued to moan and talk incoherently. Then the four girls picked her up and carried her toward the stalled automobile.

CHAPTER III

STRANGELY MISSING

"WAIT a minute," directed Betty, as she and her chums advanced, carrying the unconscious girl. "We'll have to put her down here, where the grass is soft."

"Why?" asked Amy, "she isn't heavy."

"No, but it will be better to get the auto out of the bushes, and into the road before we put her in it. Something might go wrong, and jolt her."

"That's so," agreed Mollie. "I think I can do it. Oh, but I'm nervous!"

"Shame on you!" cried Betty. "Be an outdoor girl—be your own brave self, Mollie!"

"I will!" and there was determination in her voice. "I'm sure I can get the car out all right!"

Mollie took her place at the wheel, pressed the starting button, and then, with a glance backward to see which way to steer, she slipped in the reverse gear, and let the clutch come into place. Slowly, amid a tearing away of vines and bushes, the car regained the highway.

"Good!" cried Grace. "Now, how shall we put her in, Betty?" for the "Little Captain," as she was often called (as Mollie was called "Billy") was generally looked to for advice in emergencies like these.

"You and Amy must hold her between you on the rear seat," Betty directed. "Support her all you can. Mollie will drive slowly."

"But perhaps we ought to get her to a doctor right away," spoke the owner of the car.

"Getting her to a doctor would not make up for any injury caused by a jolt," said practical Betty. "Besides, I do not think she can be seriously hurt. Her hair is so very thick that she could stand a very hard blow on the head. There are no other signs of injuries; but of course there may be internal hurts. She did not fall far, those branches were very close to the ground."

"What she can have been doing up the tree is a mystery," remarked Grace.

"Like the time when we found that five hundred dollar bill," added Mollie.

"And the 'ghost' of Elm Island, and the missing papers in the saddle bags," remarked Amy to Grace.

Mollie had brought her car to a stop, and alighted to help lift in the unconscious girl. Be-

tween them Amy and Grace held her in the tonneau, her head resting on Amy's shoulder, a damp handkerchief covering the cut to keep any dirt from getting in it. Mollie again took her place at the steering wheel, and when Betty had gotten in the girls started off with their strange passenger.

"I couldn't imagine what it was, when I saw something white falling out of the tree," spoke Mollie, driving along on high gear, but with the motor well throttled down.

"Nor could I," added Betty. "And when you steered out so suddenly, I thought surely we would crash into the stone fence, just beyond the bushes."

"So did I, but I knew there was only one thing to do, and that was to put on the brakes as hard as I could."

"And you did," said Grace. "I didn't know you could move so quickly, Mollie."

"You can do many things when the emergency comes," replied Mollie, as she turned out to avoid a rut in the road.

"This is better than a dozen lessons in the art of managing an auto," commented Betty. "Practical problems are what count—not theoretical ones. Does she seem all right, Grace?" and she looked around at the unconscious girl.

"Yes, and her breathing is better. I think she will soon come to."

"That's good. See, there's a house. We can take her in, and ask where the nearest doctor is," and Betty pointed ahead.

Presently the auto stopped before it, and to a motherly-looking woman who came out, Betty and the girls quickly explained what had happened.

"Of course! Bring the poor dear in!" the woman directed. "The men folks are over in the far meadow salting the cows, or I'd send one of them for Dr. Brown. He's most likely to be home too, now. He lives down the road a piece —about a mile."

"I can go for him in the car, and bring him back," said Mollie.

"That's good. Bring the poor dear in the bed room, and we'll look after her until the doctor comes. I'll get the camphor bottle. That's good for a faint."

The girl seemed to have again sunk into a stupor, as they carried her in, and placed her on a comfortable lounge. Then the woman of the house brought out a bottle of camphor, of generous size, and it was held to the nostrils of the unconscious one.

The sufferer turned her head away from the

pungent odor, and seemed to be struggling against some unseen force. Again she seemed to revive somewhat, and muttered:

"Oh, I can't! I can't! I don't want to go back to him! Anything but that! I don't like—I can't bear that life!"

Her voice trailed off into a mere whisper.

"You had better hurry for the doctor," said Betty, and Mollie hastened out to her car.

"I'll come with you," volunteered Grace, and Mollie was grateful.

"Suppose we take her into the bed room," suggested the woman. "It's cooler there. We can manage her. I'm real strong."

With her help it was no great task to get the girl on the bed. Her garments were loosened so that she might be more comfortable, and more camphor was used, but it seemed to have no effect.

"Suppose we go out and let her be by herself; we can't do anything more," suggested the woman. "Besides, she needs all the air she can get. That's always best for fainting folks. She may come to by herself, I'll open the window and shutters," and she proceeded to do so. Then coming out, and closing the door, they left the strange girl alone, Betty and Amy taking turns telling how the affair had happened.

"Land's sakes! Fell out of a tree!" exclaimed the woman. "What in the world do you s'pose she was doin' up in it?"

"We haven't the least idea," answered Betty.

"And who is this man she says she won't go back to?"

"We have even less idea—she has repeated that several times," spoke Amy. "Oh, I do hope they find the doctor!"

"Dr. Brown is real good," was the woman's opinion. "He cured my rheumatism, and Hetty Blake—she lives over on the Melford road—she had jaundice something terrible—she was as yellow as saffron tea, and he brought her around when old Dr. Wakefield give her up. Yes, Dr. Brown is right smart."

Thus she entertained the girls with remarks on the country life around, until Betty ventured to remark:

"I wonder if we oughtn't to look in on her?" motioning to the room where they had left the girl.

"No, best let her be," said the woman—Mrs. Meckelburn, she had said her name was.

"Hark!" exclaimed Amy a little later.

"It's an auto!" said Betty, going to the window.

She saw Mollie and Grace in the car, a young

man, with a professional air about him, at the steering wheel.

"That's Dr. Brown!" exclaimed Mrs. Meckelburn, "but I didn't know he could drive one of them things."

"I guess Mollie got too nervous," explained Betty.

The doctor caught up his bag and hurried toward the house, followed by Grace and Mollie.

"An accident!" he exclaimed in brisk tones, bowing to Betty and Amy, and taking in the woman in his greeting. "Where is she?"

"In my bed room, Dr. Brown," said Mrs. Meckelburn. "I do hope there's nothing much the matter with the poor dear."

They clustered around as the pyhsician pushed open the door. Then he turned to them with a queer look on his face.

"Must be some mistake," he said. "There is no one here."

"No one there!" cried Betty in strange tones. "Why——"

She looked over his shoulder. There in the bed was the imprint of a human form, but the girl herself had vanished!

CHAPTER IV

THE QUEER PEDDLER

For a moment after this surprising discovery had been made no one spoke. Dr. Brown looked oddly from one girl to the other, and at Mrs. Meckelburn.

"There is evidently some mystery here," he said. "I supposed there was really some one here who needed my services?" and he glanced questioningly at Mollie, who had summoned him.

"Oh, indeed there *was*," she said, quickly. "A girl fell out of a tree——"

"Out of a tree!" exclaimed the doctor, and for a moment it seemed as though he believed a joke had been attempted on him.

"Yes," went on Betty, taking up the story, "didn't Mollie tell you that? She really fell from a tree as our auto passed, and at first we thought we had struck her." Betty shot a glance of inquiry at Mollie.

"No, I didn't tell that part," confessed the owner of the new car. "I was so flustrated, and I guess Grace didn't say anything either."

"No," answered the willowy one.

"Well, I'm here, at all events, but there is no patient," said the doctor, with a smile.

"Oh, we'll pay you for your call!" exclaimed Betty, quickly taking out her silver mesh bag. "How much——"

"No, no!" said Dr. Brown somewhat sharply, "you misunderstand me. I never accept a fee in a simple accident case. What I meant about there being no patient was that she has evidently gone away, possibly in a delirium, and in that case we had better search for her, for she may be badly hurt, or do herself some injury. You say she was in this room?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Meckelburn.

"And you sat here in view of the door all the while?"

"Yes," spoke Betty. "She never came out of that door, I'm sure." Amy said the same thing.

"Then the only other possible solution is that she got out of the window," went on the physician, "for there is no other door from the room. We must look outisde," and he crossed the apartment to the casement. It had been raised, and the shutters were open when the unconscious girl had been left alone.

"The window is low—she could easily have

dropped to the ground," said Dr. Brown. "It is not more than four feet."

He leaned out to look at the ground underneath, and uttered an exclamation.

"That is what she did!" he cried. "There are the marks of feet landing heavily—small shoes—and unless some of *you* young ladies have been indulging in gymnastics."

"And see!" added Betty, standing beside the physician, "here are some of her long hairs," and she picked some from the window sill. "Oh, she did have the longest, most glorious hair!" and Betty sighed in memory, for Betty loved long tresses and her own, while they became her wonderfully well, were not very luxuriant.

"But I don't see how she could have gotten away, unconscious as she was, and injured," said Grace, with a puzzled air.

"She may have regained consciousness," spoke Dr. Brown; "or, as I said, she may have wandered off in a delirium. In that case we must try to find her. Again, she may not have been as badly hurt as you supposed, and also she may have simulated an injury hoping she would get a chance to escape unobserved. Was there anything strange about her?"

"Yes, there was," admitted Betty, slowly, and she gave the details of the accident, how, most

unexpectedly the girl had toppled from the tree, the subsequent swerving of the auto, and how, several times, the girl had murmured something about not going back to a certain man.

"Hum!" mused Dr. Brown, "it is rather odd, I must admit. What do you suppose she was doing in the tree?"

"We haven't been able to guess," confessed Amy; "perhaps she climbed up to avoid a dog—we have met several dogs to-day."

"It's possible," Dr. Brown commented.

"And the tree was an easy one to climb," spoke Mollie. "I am not a very good climber, but that tree offered temptations."

The doctor smiled.

"Well, let us make a search," he proposed. "Is there any special place where a girl, who might wish to escape observation for some unknown reason, could hide around here, Mrs. Meckelburn?"

"There's the barn."

"Very good, we will search there, and we may be able to trace her footprints. Please do not any of you walk under the window, nor in a line from it until we have made some observations. We will play a little detective game," and he smiled frankly at the girls.

But if he had hoped anything from the clue

of the footprints he was doomed to disappointment for, though there were plain indications where the girl had landed when she jumped from the window, the marks were soon lost sight of on the harder ground a short distance from the house.

A search of the barn revealed no trace of her, and one of the farm hands, coming to the house a little later, joined in the search. He reported that there had been seen no hatless, injured—or apparently injured—girl crossing the fields.

"Then she must have made a circle about the house, and gone out on the road," suggested Betty. "She is probably far enough away from here by this time, poor thing!"

"Perhaps we ought to search for her," spoke Mollie. "Of course it was not our fault, since we are sure the car did not hit her; but perhaps it scared her so that she fell."

"I should not blame myself if I were you," said the physician, kindly. "It was evidently not your fault. You did all you could for the girl. If she did not want further treatment that is her lookout. Of course, if she wandered away in a delirium, that is another story, and perhaps it would be well to search down the road. She did not pass us, or we would have seen her, coming from my office along the main highway as we

did," he said to Mollie. "A search in the opposite direction would be the only feasible thing to conduct."

"Then let's do it!" cried Mollie. "And you please drive, Dr. Brown, I haven't yet gotten over my nervousness."

Mrs. Meckelburn refused an invitation to go in the car, but the four girls started off, Dr. Brown at the wheel. They went as far back as the tree which was the scene of the accident and saw no trace of the girl. Nor had any of several other autoists, or drivers of horse vehicles, to whom they appealed, seen her.

"She has just disappeared—that's all," said Betty. "I wonder if we had better notify the police?"

"I will attend to that for you," responded Dr. Brown, kindly. "There is no need for you to be mixed up in this. Sometimes, with the best intentions in the world, one gets unpleasant notoriety in these cases. I will notify the authorities to be on the lookout for the girl, for her own sake alone. Later, if there is need of you——"

He paused suggestively.

"We will leave you our addresses," said Betty, quickly. "Thank you for looking after this for us."

"I am only too glad to be of service. Well, as long as there is no patient to be found here, I had better return to those waiting for me at my office."

"Go there in my car," proposed Mollie, quickly, "and then I will take the wheel again. I am feeling better now."

"Such a fine car as this ought to make anyone feel fine! It is a beauty!" and he seemed to caress the steering wheel. "I am getting a small runabout," he went on, "and that is how I happen to know how to drive. I learned some time ago."

They flashed past Mrs. Meckelburn's house, calling to her of their failure, and saying that they would be back soon. A little later, having left the physician at his home, they were again in the pleasant farm house, sipping tea which their hostess had thoughtfully made.

"Isn't it queer?" observed Betty.

"A strange enough happening," Amy commented.

"Quite a mystery," asserted Grace.

"And really she was a pretty girl," declared Mollie. "I wish I had her hair," and she sighed as Betty had done.

Grace strolled into the room where the girl had been, and half idly she looked about it, as though

in that way she might solve the mystery. A piece of paper in one corner caught her eye and she picked it up.

"I found this in there," she said, coming out. "It has some writing on it. Perhaps this is yours, Mrs. Meckelburn," and she held out the scrap.

"No, I'll guarantee there was not a piece of paper in that room when you carried that girl in," said the farmer's wife. "I had just swept," and she tossed her head in pardonable pride of her housework.

"What does it say?" asked Amy.

"It's evidently a piece torn from a letter," answered Grace, as she accepted the paper from the woman, "and all I can make out are the words—'not go to Shadow Valley even if'—and that's all there is to it."

"How odd!" exclaimed Mollie. "Shadow Valley is not far from here."

"And the queer girl evidently dropped that paper," declared Betty, examining the scrap. "Well, the mystery deepens, but I do not see that we can do anything to solve it."

They talked it over for some time, but could come to no other conclusion. Grace saved the scrap of paper, and soon, having bidden good-bye to Mrs. Meckelburn, they were on their way again, with Mollie at the wheel.

Gradually their nerves, upset by their adventure, resumed their poise under the influence of the fresh air and sunshine, and the gloomy atmosphere raised by the girl's accident, passed away.

They had made the turn into a road that would lead them to Deepdale when they came in sight of a man standing in the road beside a small, and rather gaudily painted wagon. He seemed to be looking in the dust for something, and Mollie, seeing him, slowed up, remarking:

"Perhaps he has a break-down. Let's ask if we can help him."

The appearance of the man, in some ways, was enough to invite the confidence of four girls, and in others was not. He had long, and very white hair, fluffy and wavy, and was dressed in a shabby suit of black, but his face had hard, cruel lines in it, as though he were in the habit of imposing his will on others.

A look at his wagon showed the character of his trade, for it was brilliantly lettered with such devices and mottoes as—"Bennington's Hair is All His Own." "Use His Restorer and Be Likewise." Another was: "Bennington's Restorer Really Restores."

"Have you lost something?" asked Mollie, bringing the car to a stop. He looked up quickly, and smiled, but the smile only seemed to make his face harder, instead of softening it.

"Yes, ladies," he said with a smirk and bow, taking off his broad brimmed hat, and running his fingers through his hair, making it fluff out more than ever, "I have lost a bolt out of part of my wagon, and I'm afraid to go on lest I break down. It dropped somewhere in the dust, but I can't find it."

"I have a supply of spare bolts in my tool box," spoke Mollie, "I'll give you one, and that will save you looking any more."

"Thank you, lady. It will be just what I want." From the tool box on the run board he soon selected a bolt that fitted his wagon.

"And now let me repay your kindness," he said. "I am, as you see, a traveling peddler of hair tonic. May I present you with a bottle?" and he offered Mollie one.

"No, thank you," and she laughed merrily. "It is something that I never use."

"You all have fine hair," returned the peddler; "but at that it would be all the better for Bennington's Restorer—I am Bennington—I make it myself," and he bowed. "Won't you take it. I can guarantee it harmless."

"No, thank you just the same," repeated Mollie. "And you are entirely welcome to the bolt. Good-bye," and she started her car.

CHAPTER V

PAUL AT THE WHEEL

THE girls looked back at the old peddler as they swept on. He was standing beside his horse, evidently mending some part of the harness.

"It was rather a dilapidated outfit," remarked Betty. "I don't see how he can cover much ground in a day."

"Probably he doesn't," answered Mollie. "He may sleep in his wagon, eat there—dining on bread and cheese or herring—and so reduce the high cost of living. Then he may make a big profit on his hair restorer. Ugh! The stuff! I could not bear to use it.' '

"Nor I; and yet he had nice hair."

"Perhaps he'd have that anyhow. He meant it well enough—offering us the bottle."

"Yes," agreed Betty. "But it was just as well not to take it. My! what a day of adventures this has been!"

"It has started in almost the way some days did when we were on our tramp," spoke Grace, from the tonneau.

"Or when we were at the lake, trying not to be afraid of the 'ghost'," added Amy. "Do you intend to do any more cruising this fall, Betty?"

"We may. Would you like it?"

"Would we?" cried Grace, "just ask us!"

"Now please wait," broke in Mollie. "I may have a little plan of my own to propose soon."

"What is it?" begged Amy.

"I haven't it all worked out yet. I'll tell you as soon as I have. It may offer us a chance for some fun——"

"And adventures?" asked Betty, quickly.

"And adventures," assented Mollie. "But one thing I do want, and that is to have each of you girls run the car. I don't want to be selfish and drive all the while."

"I would like to learn," said Betty, eagerly. "It's good of you to want us to, Mollie."

"No, I have rather a selfish motive back of it. Sometimes I want to sit in the tonneau and not have to worry about running over a dog——"

"Look out!" suddenly cried Betty, impulsively grasping Mollie's arm. "That child!"

A little toddler had run from the yard of a house near the road, and was scampering across the highway, his mother in close pursuit.

Quickly Mollie put on both brakes, and threw

out the clutch, but there was no need; for the child, with the perverseness of youth, had turned and was running back toward the gate, evidently frightened by the frantic tooting of the horn, the bulb of which Mollie pressed spasmodically.

"Oh my! What a scare!" panted Mollie, as she slipped in low gear, and started up again, without coming to a full stop.

"Well, I don't want to seem mean, but he is getting just what he deserves," said Grace, looking back, "and that is—a spanking. Toddlers must be made to learn the danger of rushing blindly across auto roads."

"I suppose so," agreed Mollie. "I could just see little Paul then," she went on. "If I had hit that child——"

She did not finish, but they all knew what she meant.

Deepdale was reached without further incident, and the girls agreed that Mollie had piloted her car wonderfully well for a beginner.

"Of course I've got lots to learn," she said to her chums, "but that will come gradually, the demonstrator said. One learns, after a while, to steer instinctively, and to do everything almost automatically—like slowing down, applying the brakes and so on. Now you girls must come over to-night, and we'll——"

"Talk!" interrupted Amy. "We've got lots to talk about."

"We always have," said Grace, looking in vain for a chocolate. The car had stopped in front of her house, and Mollie had said she would leave the other girls at their residences.

"Oh, don't bother," Betty had protested. "You must be tired, and it's only a step."

"No, we must do this in style!" decided Mollie. "What is the use of a motor car if one can't bring one's friends home in the proper mode?" And she had her way.

The auto was to be kept in a public garage until Mrs. Billette could have one built on her own premises, and, leaving her machine with the man in charge, Mollie walked home.

That night her three chums called, and the talk was almost entirely devoted to the strange girl and her queer disappearance.

In the days that followed the four inseparables took many rides out into the beautiful country around Deepdale. True to her determination, Mollie insisted on Betty, Amy and Grace taking at least a few lessons. Betty was quick to learn, but Grace was not quite strong enough to handle the wheel properly, and Amy was too timid. Still, either of the latter could manage the car on a straight, level road, but Betty was the only

one who persisted enough to be able to get a license, which she one day took out on Mollie's suggestion.

"And what is the something you were going to tell us?" asked Betty of Mollie one day, as they were returning from a short run, Betty at the wheel.

"Oh, it isn't quite ready yet," she said. "I'll tell you in plenty of time to prepare for it, though. Mind your wheel, Bet, there are two cars coming back of us, and I think they're going to pass us close."

"Well, let them look out, I'm on the right side of the road."

Two cars, scorching, did pass them, throwing up a cloud of dust that caused the girls to gasp and choke.

"Horrid creatures!" cried Grace. "My new cloak will be spoiled!" and she dusted off the auto garment she had recently purchased.

"It is such as they who give all autoists a bad name," remarked Mollie. "One rule of our club must be never to scorch."

"Our club?" asked Grace, wonderingly.

"There—I've told part of my secret!" exclaimed Mollie, in some confusion. "I was going to suggest that, as we have a sort of informal Camping and Tramping Club, and as there is

a kind of motor boat club feeling existing among us, we form an auto club."

"Let's!" proposed Amy. "Bet has the boat, you have the car, Mollie, but poor Grace and I——"

"That doesn't make a bit of difference!" broke in Mollie. "You don't have to have an auto to belong to this club. Just as when you get your airship, Grace, we'll join your aero club; though you'll be the only one with a flying machine."

"No flies for me!" said Grace, determinedly.

They reached Mollie's house rather early that afternoon, not having gone far.

"Do come in for a cup of tea," urged Mollie. "It will refresh you all. No, no, Paul!" she called to her brother, "you must not get in sister's auto when she is not in it," for the little follow had started to climb up in the front seat as the girls strolled toward the house.

"Oo dot any tandy?" he asked, coming toward them.

"Oh dear, I wonder if I will always have to bribe you, Paul?" sighed Mollie. "Grace, will you kindly oblige again? I guess I shall have to appoint you official candy distributor."

"That would suit me," laughed Grace. "Here, Paul, and don't get that on your suit—the choco-

late is so sticky and messy in warm weather," and Grace daintily removed, with the tip of her tongue, some brown spots from the ends of her rosy fingers that had passed the candy to the little boy.

The girls were sipping tea in the library, and talking, when there came from out in front the sudden throbbing of an auto motor. Mollie leaped up and rushed to the window. Then she screamed:

"Oh girls! Paul is in my car and it's running away with him! Oh, stop him, some one!"

They all saw little Paul—a mite in the seat—holding bravely to the steering wheel, and the car moving down the hill in front of the Billette home.

CHAPTER VI

A TOUR PROPOSED

BETTY was the first to rush from the house. She was closely followed by Grace, who seemed to rise to the emergency in a manner not usual.

"Can we stop him? Can we stop him?" cried Mollie, over and over again, as she clung to Amy and hurried on after Betty and Grace. "Oh, if mother were to see him now!"

"Perhaps we can reach him in time," suggested Amy, consolingly. "Don't worry, Mollie."

"Oh, whatever possessed him to do a thing like that? I have told him time and again never to get into the car alone."

The four girls ran swiftly across the lawn—yes, swiftly, for no such creations as "hobble skirts" hindered them. Fortunately Mrs. Billette, whose French nature was easily excited had not seen the happening. Dodo was out with the maid.

"Paul! Paul!" cried Mollie. "Put on the brake! Stop the car!"

"It doesn't seem to be going very fast," panted Betty, as she kept on beside Grace.

"He hasn't thrown in the gear—that's one good thing," exclaimed Grace. "He doesn't know how——"

She paused, for from the car came a laugh of childish delight, and a change in the sound of the motor told that something new had occurred.

"He has the gear in now!" cried Betty.

She was running diagonally across the lawn, trying to intercept the car. In her mind it was plain what had happened.

Paul had, with the impishness of childhood, climbed up in the auto. It was a simple matter to even blunder on pushing the button that would set the self-starter in operation. The car had been left standing on a level bit of road, but, just ahead of it, was a rather steep slope. Mollie had neglected to leave the emergency brake set, and when the motor started there was vibration enough to send the car over the little space that separated it from the slope. Then it simply rolled down. That was what had happened first.

But now had entered a new complication.

It seemed that Paul had a tricycle, worked by foot pedals and hand levers, and he was quite

expert in its use. He had now put into practice what had been told him about his toy, and had added his observations of Mollie's operation of her car.

After starting the motor Paul had somehow managed to slip in the low gear, and the marvel of it was that he knew enough to disengage the clutch while he did this. Afterward he told how he had heard the demonstrator impress many times on Mollie the need of doing so.

"Oh, we'll never get him now!" cried Mollie, as she realized that the auto was moving under power now, and not merely by momentum. "Oh, Paul!"

The child was actually steering—the girls could see that, for the auto swerved in and out, narrowly missing the curbstone, as he turned and twisted the wheel too much.

"Paul! Paul!" cried his sister. "Stop it! Stop it!"

But Paul only laughed. He was having too much fun to want to stop.

It was hopeless for the girls to try to catch the auto now. They were far behind it, but still Betty ran on. Several narrow escapes had Paul on that perilous journey, and then in the nick of time he was saved from what might have been a serious accident.

WILL KICKED HIS WHEEL FROM UNDER HIM AND WAS AT PAUL'S SIDE.

Up the road was coming a racing car, going at high speed. The man, crouched almost under the steering wheel, if he saw Mollie's car at all, probably imagined that a motorist of experience was guiding it. But Paul was on the wrong side of the road, and there was no telling at what moment he might shift the course.

Then, riding like the wind, out from behind the racing car shot a bicyclist. At the sight of him Mollie screamed:

"Will—Will Ford! Save Paul! He's in my car—there ahead of you!"

Will Ford was riding directly toward Paul. In an instant Grace's brother had sensed the situation. Skillfully going around the racing car, which had fortunately slackened speed as the driver evidently realized that something was wrong, Will guided his wheel toward Mollie's auto.

Then he turned, so as to ride in the direction in which it was advancing, with ever-increasing speed. Will gauged his progress to that of the car, rode up alongside the run-board, and, in another instant, kicked his wheel from under him and was at Paul's side. In another second he had snapped off the power and applied the brakes.

"What for oo 'top me widing?" demanded Paul, rather indignantly.

Will's heart was beating fast, and he panted for breath, but he managed to answer:

"Too bad, Paulie, but you haven't any license to drive a car, you know, and a policeman might take you."

"Yes?"

"Sure. You mustn't do it again," and Will's voice was sufficiently stern.

"All wight—I won't. But I tan wun a tar, all'e same; tan't I?"

Paul was evidently proud of what he had done.

"Yes, you can, but you mustn't—you mustn't! Do you understand?"

"Yes. Dot any tandy?"

Will laughed.

"No," he said, "but maybe the girls have. Here they come."

Half hysterical, Mollie and her chums came running up. They were all rather "limp," as they confessed later.

"Oh, Paul, you naughty boy!" cried his sister. "Mamma will punish you for this."

His big eyes opened wide.

"I ikes to run tar," he said, and his lip quivered.

"Don't be too harsh with him," murmured Grace.

"I can't help it—he must know how danger-

ous it is," insisted Mollie. "You won't ever do it again; will you, Paul?"

"Nope. Dot any tandy?"

Their laughter relieved their strained feelings.

"Oh, Will, I can't thank you enough!" declared Mollie. "I thought I would die when I saw that racing car coming toward him."

"I just saw him in time," exclaimed Will. "I had to act quickly, for there was no telling when he'd try to cross the street."

Paul was contentedly chewing a candy Grace had produced and the little crowd that had gathered, on seeing Will's act, began to disperse, understanding what had happened. Then Mollie, assuming the wheel, directed the car back to her house, taking the girls and Paul in it. Will went back to get his bicycle and the excitement was over. But it took some time for the girls to quiet down.

To impress on him the danger of what he had done, Mrs. Billette sent Paul to bed. He cried and protested, but it was necessary, for he was too daring a little chap.

Three days passed. The girls were at Mollie's house, having assembled in answer to her telephone message.

"Well, it's all settled!" she exclaimed, as the trio came in together.

"What?" asked Betty.

"Our auto tour. That's what I've been working on. I wanted to plan a nice route—one that would take in a good stretch of country, enable us to see new places, and be comfortable. Now I have it all mapped out. You'll come; won't you—all of you?" and she looked appealingly at her chums.

"But what's it all about?" asked Grace, wonderingly.

"Why, since I have a car, we must get the best use out of it we can. So why can't we four—and a chaperone, if we think we need one—go for a tour, the same as when we walked—only this time we'll ride? We can make five hundred, or a thousand, miles, if we choose, stopping over night in different places. Won't it be fun?"

"Jolly!" cried Amy.

"Scrumptious!" was Betty's contribution.

"Mollie, you're a dear!" declared Grace, with a hug. "When can we go?"

"Soon now. I think——" A maid knocked at the door.

"Yes; what is it?" asked Mollie.

"If you please, Miss Billette, there's a gentleman to see you."

"A gentleman?"

"Yes, rather elderly, and he keeps making up verses, Miss. I'm not sure about him. Will you see him?"

"Verses? Oh, it must be that dear old Mr. Lagg—the storekeeper!" exclaimed Mollie. "Of course I'll see him. But, girls, what do you imagine he wants?"

CHAPTER VII

MR. LAGG'S OFFER

With a broad smile on her face, the maid came back, escorting Mr. Lagg, who, at the sight of the girls, bowed low, and declaimed:

"I'm glad to see you,
I hope we'll agree,
That you are as happy
Now to see me!"

"Good!" cried Betty, clapping her hands until the palms were rosy. "We are indeed glad to see you."

"Of course," added Mollie. "How could you leave your store long enough to run down here, Mr. Lagg?"

"Well, it *is* running a risk," he answered, as he took a chair Amy set out for him. "But I have important business down here, so I thought I'd call. I worked out that little verse on the way down," he confided to the girls.

"You are extending your range," remarked Grace, who was languidly eating chocolates. "That is, your poetry is getting more elaborate."

"It is indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Lagg, brightening up on hearing this praise. "I am glad you noticed that. Yes, I am gradually getting it better, and on a higher plane. That is what worried me about leaving my store alone."

"Did you leave it all alone?" asked Betty, for the girls knew he did quite a trade with the summer colonists of Rainbow Lake.

"Practically so," was the answer. "I have a boy I hire occasionally, but he hasn't the least talent in the line of poetry, and I know my customers will miss that. However, they will have to put up with it for a few hours. I am going back as soon as I can.

"Perhaps," he added, cautiously, "I should never have worked up my versifying talent; but, somehow, I just couldn't seem to help it. I started in a modest way, just as I did in my store, and it seemed to grow of itself. Now my customers have come to look for it, and I know if Johnnie—that's the boy I spoke of as being left in charge—I know he'll rhyme the wrong words—that is, if he attempts anything at all, which he is likely to do. And nothing displeases a customer more than to listen to wrong

rhymes; don't you think so?" and he appealed to the chums.

"Of course," assented Mollie, with a look at the others to ask their opinion as to what Mr. Lagg had in view, and what his object could be in calling.

The storekeeper appeared to be nervous, and ill at ease, and it was evident that he had attired himself with care for the trip.

He was obviously uncomfortable in his "Sunday-go-to-meetin'" suit, and a stiff shirt and a stiffer collar did not add to his ease. But he stood it manfully. Sitting on the edge of the chair he looked from one to the other, twirling his hat.

"How—how is trade?" asked Mollie, feeling that she ought to say something, but scarcely knowing what. She seemed to recall that this was a way to engage a business man in conversation.

"Not what it should be," replied Mr. Lagg, with a smile. He seemed to feel that he was making progress now. At least he was in his own element. "Not what it should be. I miss you girls. When you used to run in now and then for something in my line I did better. You were good customers, and I always shaded the prices all I could, besides reciting all my newest

poetry as soon as I made it up. It isn't everyone I do that for," he added. "Why, to some customers I never speak more than a line or two in a whole year. But you girls—well, you're different. I miss seeing the *Gem* tied at my dock. There isn't a chance that you'll go cruising again; is there?" he asked, eagerly.

"Come, sail upon the bright blue lake,
You, of my goods a choice may make.
My prices you will find quite right,
I'm open until eight at night."

"You always did treat us right, Mr. Lagg," laughed Betty, "but I don't believe we'll do any more cruising—at least, not right away. We're going in for land cruising now."

"Land cruising?"

"Yes, Mollie has an auto, and we were just planning a tour when you came in."

"So, you see, unless you could arrange to have a sort of traveling store, we couldn't patronize you very often," went on Mollie, wondering why Mr. Lagg did not come to the point. He had evidently called with some special object in view, and leaving his establishment during the height of the season would seem to indicate that the object was not a trivial one. "But we'll stop

in whenever we're near you," Mollie concluded.

"Thank you, Miss Billette. So you are going on an auto cruise; eh?"

"A tour, yes."

"Then that may fit in with what I have called about," said Mr. Lagg, quickly. "Yes, it may be just the very best idea yet. Excuse me a moment while I think," he said, and he closed his eyes. His head nodded two or three times in a satisfied sort of way, and occasionally he murmured to himself. The girls looked at one another, unable to fathom the meaning of this conduct. Then Mr. Lagg whistled and suddenly exclaimed:

"I have it! You can solve this mystery, too!"

"Another mystery?" queried Grace, rather languidly, as she took a more comfortable position on the divan. "We seem to be having a monopoly of them."

"What is it, Mr. Lagg?" asked Mollie.

"Were you much afraid of that ghost on Elm Island?" he replied, by asking another question.

"Not at all!" declared Betty, quickly.

"Especially as it was only—what it was," said Grace, with a laugh.

"Then I've got another one for you to solve," went on the poetical grocer. "It's a haunted house!"

He beamed on the girls as though he had proposed the most delightful sort of an affair.

"A—a haunted house!" faltered Amy.

"That's it—a regular haunted house—groans, slamming doors—queer lights, and all that sort of thing."

"Where—where is it?" asked Betty.

"In Shadow Valley."

Instinctively the four girls started.

"Why, we—we were near there the other day," said Mollie. "We didn't see any house that appeared to be haunted, though."

"No, and that's just it," went on Mr. Lagg. "You see it's only recently been haunted, and that makes it all the worse."

"Tell us about it," suggested Betty. "Girls, this is getting interesting. We must take this in on our tour."

"Don't!" pleaded Amy, the timid one, shivering in spite of herself.

"You know that old mansion, at the far end of the valley; don't you?" asked Mr. Lagg. "At least, you must have heard about it."

"You mean Kenyon's Folly?" responded Mollie, who began to have a glimmering of what was meant.

"Yes," answered the storekeeper. "Mr. Kenyon, who was once a millionaire, built that man-

sion after ideas of his own. Everyone said Shadow Valley—at least that part of it—was too gloomy and out of the way to be a good place for a mansion like that, and the folks around here said it was foolish. They called it Kenyon's Folly from the start, though he named it Kenyon's Woodland Lodge, or some such fancy name as that."

"And did it turn out as the people said?" asked Amy.

"Yes," answered Mr. Lagg. "From the very first his wife took a dislike to the place. She said it was too gloomy, and in spite of a lot of entertainments and parties—elaborate affairs they were, too—life there was dreary. They had lots of company, but Shadow Valley seemed to cast a gloom over the big mansion.

"Then Mr. Kenyon died, and some said it was partly due to grief over the fact that his wife refused to live in the place. At any rate, he closed it up, and went abroad, I believe, not living long after he started to tour Europe.

"Then there was trouble over his will, his whole estate was thrown into court, and the heirs fought and squabbled over the mansion, as well as over the rest of his possessions. No one could get title to it, and the place fell into neglect."

"Yes, it certainly does look lonesome and

forlorn around there," said Betty. "I was close to it about a year ago, but I never heard that it was haunted."

"It wasn't until recently," said Mr. Lagg, "and that brings me to this part of the story, and that's why I called on you. I might say that I now own that haunted mansion."

"You own it!" cried Grace. All the girls were interested now, whatever they had been before.

"Yes. After years of litigation the courts, last spring, ordered the mansion sold. I saw a chance to get a bargain, and as I had some money put away I bought in the property. I got it cheap, but I purchased it through an agent so that no one, except a very few, know that I own it."

"What are you going to do—live in it?" asked Mollie.

"Ugh! Fancy living in a haunted house!" exclaimed Amy, looking over her shoulder as though she felt a ghostly hand laid on it.

"No, I don't intend to live there," said Mr. Lagg. "I didn't buy it for that. But I thought it would be a good investment, and I had an idea of forming a company, and turning it into a hotel. By making some changes the surroundings could be made less gloomy, and the place would pay.

"But before I could do that I got an offer from some doctors, who wanted to establish a sort of sanitarium for the treatment of nervous diseases. They saw the mansion, and decided it would be just the thing, being so quiet, and all that."

"I should think it would be," murmured Grace.

"But where does the 'haunt' come in?" Betty wanted to know.

"I'm coming to that," spoke Mr. Lagg, being now too interested to quote a couplet. "Matters were going on well, and I expected to close the deal, and make a pretty penny, when the doctors said they couldn't take the property, as it was haunted, and of course a haunted house, with queer noises in the night, would never do as a home for nervous invalids. I could see that myself."

"But how did they know it was haunted?" asked Mollie.

"It seems that some of them were inspecting the place late one afternoon, a day or so ago," said the storekeeper, "when a shower came up, and they had to stay inside until it was over, which was after dark. It was then they heard the queer groans, and saw strange lights, and felt cold draughts of wind."

"Bur-r-r-r-r!" shivered Amy. "This is getting on my nerves."

"I guess it got on the nerves of the doctors," said Mr. Lagg, ruefully, "for they called off the deal, and said they could not take the house unless I would get rid of the haunt. Of course I laughed, and made an investigation."

"And you didn't find anything?" put in Betty, quickly.

"Excuse me, Miss, but I did," replied Mr. Lagg, quietly.

"You did! What?"

"Just what the doctors said—queer groanings—strange lights—like brimstone, and the same sort of smell—sulphur. I—I didn't stay long, I don't mind admitting that."

For a moment the girls were silent, and then Mollie spoke.

"Did it ever occur to you, Mr. Lagg," she asked, "that those doctors might be playing a trick on you to get you to part with the property cheap? A haunted house isn't the best sort of real estate, you know; but haunts and ghosts can easily be imitated, and those doctors might be up to some such trick as that."

"I did think of that," went on the storekeeper, "and that is why I came to you."

"You came to us!" chorused the girls.

"Yes. You see, you solved the mystery of the ghost of Elm Island, and I don't see why you can't do the same thing for Kenyon's Folly."

"But that ghost, on the island—was a natural one," said Grace. "And the boys helped us to discover what it was."

"Very well," said Mr. Lagg, calmly. "I've no objection to the boys helping you in this case. In fact, it might be better. But what I want to know is, could you—and would you—dare try to solve the ghostly mystery?"

The girls looked at one another. Amy was shaking her head in the negative. Betty and Mollie seemed interested, for they were born leaders, Betty especially. Grace reached for another chocolate, always a source of inspiration for her.

"Of course I'm not asking you to give up your time and go to a lot of trouble for nothing," resumed Mr. Lagg, quickly. "I am willing to pay you well. So I make you this offer. If you can discover what makes those ghostly sounds and manifestations, and can show me a way to get rid of them, if they are natural, which I am sure they are, why, I'll pay you a good sum. I can afford to, for I can then sell the mansion to the sanitarium doctors. Will you try it?"

"But if those doctors are interested in depre-

ciating the value of the property, by making it appear haunted, they would have a good object in preventing us from finding out what causes the queer noises and lights," said Mollie.

"Exactly," agreed Mr. Lagg, "but you girls were smart enough to solve that five hundred dollar mystery, and the mystery on Elm Island, so I have hopes that you can help me out in this. That is why I called. Will you help me?"

"Shall we, girls?" asked Mollie.

CHAPTER VII

IN THE MUD

Mr. Lagg looked hopefully from one to the other of the Outdoor Girls. Clearly he was very much in earnest over his strange offer, and he saw nothing out of the ordinary in it. But it must be admitted that it is not every day four girls are asked to take a motor tour and solve the mystery of a ghost-haunted house. Betty and her chums evidently realized that.

Betty finally spoke.

"Well," she said, slowly, "we would like to do you a favor, Mr. Lagg, and we wouldn't want you to pay us——"

"I won't have you undertake it on any other basis," he interrupted. "If you solve that mystery for me it will be a big favor, and worth paying for. I might make up a verse about that part of it, but I won't take your time. But please consider it."

"If we did it at all," spoke Mollie, "we would do it as a favor to you, for you have been very

kind to us. But I don't like to promise to undertake it. I'm sure mamma would object."

"I wouldn't want to stay all night in a haunted house," declared Amy, with a shudder, whereat Grace cried:

"Don't do that! You'll have us all nervous before we know it."

"You might not have to stay there all night," said Mr. Lagg, "though of course I know that is customary in solving mysteries of this kind. You might be able to tell what it was without staying there long. I wouldn't want you to run any risks, you know."

"Why don't you undertake it yourself?" asked Betty.

"I can't spare the time. I am needed at my store. That boy is sure to wrap up the wrong kind of tea or sugar, and my customers are very particular. And as for the poetry end of the business, he is no good at that at all. No, I can't spare the time."

"But if you think those doctors have an object in making the mansion appear haunted," spoke Grace, "why do you not go to the authorities and complain? Surely they would do something for you."

"I thought of that," said Mr. Lagg, simply, "but you know what the police are about ghosts.

They would only laugh at me, and do nothing. Besides, if these doctors are doing it, they are sharp enough to cover their tracks well. I would have no chance. But they would never suspect you girls, and they might betray themselves. Come now, will you look into this for me?"

He was very much in earnest, and Mollie, who had at first been inclined to laugh at the ghost theory, began to think that at least Mr. Lagg had some basis for his alarm. If after all his work in getting the property, that no one had cared for so long, it was to become useless on his hands, he was to be pitied, for he had labored hard to accumulate his savings.

Still the girls did not want to be rash, to run into danger, or undertake something that would get them unpleasantly talked about, for in no place other than in a country town is there so much gossip.

"You needn't answer me right away," went on the storekeeper. "Take a little time and think it over. Speak to your folks about it, and tell the boys, if you like. But if these ghosts, whatever they are, don't get out of that place soon, I'll lose all the money I put in it."

"Did those doctors hint at taking it at a lower figure than you offered it for?" asked Betty.

"No, they haven't yet. If that is their game

they will wait a little longer, I think," spoke Mr. Lagg. "But don't be in a hurry to decide now. Think it over. I'll go now, for I must get back to my store.

"I'm glad to have seen you,
One and all.
When up my way,
Please make a call."

He bowed to them all in turn, and took his leave, the girls excitedly talking about the object of his visit, as he went out.

"Did you ever hear of such a thing?" asked Grace.

"The haunted mansion of Shadow Valley," remarked Mollie. "It reads like a book title."

"Maybe we could make a story of it," suggested Amy, whose taste ran somewhat to literature, and who had won several prizes in school essay work.

"We'd better solve the mystery first," said practical Betty, "then we'll know what sort of a book to make. I wonder if we ought to take this up?" and she gazed half-doubtfully, half-suggestingly, at her chums.

"Not right away, at any rate!" exclaimed Mollie. "Let's talk about our motor tour. I'm

just dying to get off on that. Afterward we can consider Mr. Lagg's offer. Poor man, he seemed really worried! I'd like to help him if we could."

"So would I!" declared Betty.

The girls alternated their talk between the proposed tour and the haunted mansion. The latter was left in abeyance, but they tentatively decided to take a long auto trip, as soon as they could arrange for a chaperone to go with them on such occasions as they would stay over night at hotels, while others nights were to be spent at the homes of relatives or friends. In a way it would be a duplication of their camping and tramping trip, except that they would cover a wider range of country, and be more comfortable.

"And I only hope we have as much fun!" exclaimed Mollie. "Now, girls, we've talked enough. Let's go for a run. I telephoned to have my car brought here, and——"

"Here it is—quite marvelous!" interrupted Betty, as the large and handsome auto drew up outside, in charge of a man from the garage.

Auto veils, bonnets, goggles and gowns were soon donned, Mollie's chums having come partly prepared for a trip, and soon, with Mollie at the

wheel, they were riding down the pleasant main street of Deepdale.

"Hey there! Take us along!" came a voice as they turned off the main thoroughfare into a smaller road that led to the farming country beyond.

"It's Will and Frank," said Grace, as she observed the two boys.

"And there comes Allen," added Amy. "Now, Betty, maybe you'll talk more," for the Little Captain had been rather silent.

"Shall we take them?" asked Mollie, as she noted Betty's blushing cheeks. "There is plenty of room." Her car would seat seven with comfort.

"Take us along!" pleaded Will. "We'll buy the chocolates, girls."

"Oh, let him come," petitioned Grace, for her candy stock had again run low.

"That's all she thinks of!" declared Betty. "But I have no objections."

"Especially when Allen is around," taunted Mollie, as she slowed up her car near the sidewalk.

"Come on, fellows!" exulted Will. "We're going to have a ride in the joy wagon."

"The chocolates," Grace reminded him, coolly, as he started to get in between her and Amy.

"We'll buy them when we get out a ways," he promised.

"Get them at Lee's," she stipulated. "His are best."

"Did you ever see such a sister!" cried Will. "She has no heart! Very well, run us around to Lee's, Mollie. I'll get the candy if it—breaks me," and he began searching through his pockets, picking up bits of change on the way.

The other boys took their seats, and soon the machine was moving again, a stop being made for the chocolates. Grace insisted on going into the store with her brother.

"If I didn't he'd palm off the twenty-cent kind on us, and tell us they were Lee's best," she said to her chums.

"You eat so many of them that you can't tell the difference—your taste is jaded," taunted Will.

"Can't I, though?" replied Grace. "Well, I'm not going to give you the chance to try me. We'll have the best!"

Again they were under way, Grace passing around the box of confectionery.

"Shall we tell the boys about Mr. Lagg?" asked Betty of Mollie, beside whom she rode on the front seat, the boys and other girls being in the tonneau.

"Just as you like."

"Then I think I will." The story was soon told.

"Was he in earnest?" demanded Will.

"He seemed so."

"Then let's have a try at laying the ghost!" proposed Frank. "I wonder what the union rates are for ridding haunted houses of the haunt? We must have union wages."

"Of course," agreed Will. "Girls, will you transfer any rights you may have as ghost-layers to us, if we pay you a commission?"

"We'll think about it," murmured Betty.

"I believe it's all foolishness!" declared Grace. "Maybe Mr. Lagg was only making fun of us."

"No, there *is* something in it," said Allen Washburn, quietly.

"How do you know?" demanded Will, quickly.

"Because I acted as Mr. Lagg's representative in some legal matters," replied the young law student, who was allowed to do some practice. "I know that he owns the old mansion, and I heard, indirectly, that he was having trouble disposing of it to the sanitarium doctors. Of course I can't say as to the ghost, but there is some hitch over carrying out the transaction. If

you girls could solve the mystery, providing there is one, I know you would be doing Mr. Lagg a service."

"Then let's do it!" cried impulsive Mollie.

"And we'll help," added Will.

Half-jokingly they talked about it as they motored over the pleasant road. There had been a heavy shower the night before and the main highways were in excellent condition, though a trifle muddy in spot. Of course some of the less-used country roads would be well-nigh impassable.

It was while crossing one of these roads, on a hard macadam highway, that the girls and boys saw, stuck in the mud of the poorer path, a peddler's wagon. The bony horse was doing its best to move the vehicle, which had sunk down in a hole, one wheel being imbedded in the mud to the hub.

"Why, it's that hair-tonic man!" exclaimed Mollie, as she slowed down to avoid a rut in the road.

"No, his wagon is all painted with gaudy signs," said Betty. "That's a boy driving that wagon. Why—why!" she exclaimed, as she caught sight of the lad, "it's the same boy who took home the little lost girl for us—the same one who told us about the man with the five hundred dollar bill. It's Jimmie Martin!"

CHAPTER IX

IN SHADOW VALLEY

THE boy, who was endeavoring—and by gentle urging, be it said to his credit—to get the horse to pull the wagon out of the mud-hole, looked up on hearing his name spoken by Betty. At first he did not recognize the girls, and his face plainly showed this.

"Don't you know us?" asked Mollie, as she brought her car to a stop.

The boy shook his head. Then, as he looked from face to face, a light came over his own.

"Oh, yes!" he cried. "You found the little lost child when you were on your walking tour, and turned her over to me."

"Exactly," agreed Betty. "But you seem to be in trouble, Jimmie," for the bony horse had given over the attempt to move the mired wagon and was patiently resting between the shafts, awaiting developments.

"I am in trouble," Jimmie admitted, frankly. "Have you given up your business, and are

you working for some one else?" Grace wanted to know. "Why have you the wagon? The last time you carried your own pack."

"I'm still my own boss," he replied, with a smile. "I am trying for a larger trade, that's all. I got the chance to buy this outfit cheap, and I took it. I guess I got it too cheap," he added, ruefully, "for this horse isn't strong enough to pull me out of this mud-hole. I shouldn't have come this way."

He looked down at the soft, miry road. The one wheel seemed to be sinking deeper and deeper into the clay, and the others showed a propensity to follow its example.

"Where did you come from?" asked Will, whose sister had explained to him and the other boys under what circumstances they first met the young peddler.

"Up Shadow Valley way," was the answer, and instinctively the auto party of boys and girls started, and looked at one another.

"Er—was trade good up that way?" asked Frank.

"Oh, not very. You see, there are not enough folks living there. So I thought I'd take a short cut over to Limeburg. I generally do pretty well there. But I guess I'd have done better to have gone the long way. I'm stuck for fair.

Go 'long there, Stamp!" he called to the horse. "See if you can move the boat."

"Stamp? Is that his name?" asked Betty.

"I just christened him that, Miss," replied Jimmie, with a smile.

"Why?" asked Grace, who was always the last one to see a joke.

"Because, Miss, he's—stuck!" was the answer, and the others, who had anticipated this, laughed at poor Grace.

"I don't care!" she said. "I was thinking of something else then."

"Well, I guess I'll have to stay here until this mud dries up," went on Jimmie, "or I might feed up Stamp until he is strong enough to pull me out. Only that would take too long, I'm afraid. He's been kept on a diet of carpet tacks lately, to judge by the many fine points about him," he added, whimsically.

Will alighted from the auto, and, going as far as the edge of the muddy road, looked critically at the stalled wagon. Then he asked:

"Have you a long rope?"

"Not a very long one," said the boy peddler, "but I have one that may do. I'll get it," and he delved in the rear of his vehicle.

"What's the game?" asked Frank.

"I was going to see if we couldn't pull him

out of the hole," replied Will. "If the rope is long enough to reach from his wagon to the auto, and the rope holds, and his wagon doesn't pull apart with the strain, we can do it."

"Oh, I hope we can!" cried Mollie. "We must try."

Jimmie produced the rope, and, tossing one end of it to Will, proved that it was long enough. It looked sufficiently strong, too.

"Now, Mollie, if you'll turn around, and back down as near as you can, we'll see what we can do," proposed Will.

While the car was being manipulated to the proper position, Will tied some knots in the rope.

"Fasten this end to the middle of the whiffletree," he called to Jimmie, tossing the loop to him. "In that way you won't have to unhitch the horse, nor get out in the mud yourself."

"Oh, I won't mind that—if I can get out of this hole."

"Might as well take it as easy as you can," went on Will. "That's the ticket. Be sure your knots are firm."

"Yes, don't tie granny ones the way I did the night the *Gem* got adrift," murmured Grace.

The rope was soon fast to the wagon and backed-up auto.

"Go ahead slowly," cautioned Will. "We don't know what will give way first, the horse or the wagon. Take it easy, Mollie."

Slowly the auto started. There came a strain on the rope. There was a creaking to the old vehicle, and then it slowly began to emerge from the mud. The old horse, who had almost gone to sleep, roused up at this strange activity, and was literally forced to stir out of his tracks. In a few seconds the wagon was on the firm road, the auto having pulled it in a diagonal direction from the mud-hole.

"Thanks, ever so much!" exclaimed Jimmie. "I'm sure I can't thank you enough. If ever you get stuck——"

"You'll pull us out!" finished Mollie.

"Not until Stamp is better able to do it," the boy answered with a laugh. "But I'll do all I can."

"And so you didn't like Shadow Valley?" asked Will, as the boy made ready to proceed on his way.

"No, it's too gloomy for me. Hardly anyone lives there."

"Did you see that big mansion up there?" asked Grace.

"The one that rich man built, you mean? Yes, I passed near it a while ago. It's only about three miles from here. The grounds are pretty

well in ruins now, but the house is good."

"See anything strange about it?" asked Will.

"Strange? What do you mean?"

"Oh, well, I mean—er—any tramps in it—or anything like that?"

"No, not a thing," and Jimmie looked curiously at his questioner. "Well, I must be going. No more muddy roads for me!"

The auto party took their places again, Betty succeeding Mollie at the wheel, and Will being promised a chance later. Then they started off.

"Where are you going?" asked Grace, as Betty turned up a road on which they seldom journeyed. "This doesn't take us anywhere in particular."

"It goes to Shadow Valley," answered Betty.

"Are—are you going there?" gasped Amy.

"Just to get a glimpse of it," was the reply. "Surely you're not afraid—in broad daylight."

"And with us along?" demanded Will, heroically. "Shame!"

"Oh, well——" began Amy, but she did not finish.

"This side road leads right into the valley," said Mollie, a little later.

"Then we'll take it," decided Betty, and she swung the car about. A little later they were looking down from a height into the strange valley.

One end—that nearest them—was laid out in a number of small farms, on which were substantial houses. But the other end, where "Kenyon's Folly" had been built, was in the narrower part, and was almost deserted as regards residences. This section of the valley was narrower, the hills—almost mountains—rose high on either side, hemming it in. This produced deep shadows early and late in the day, and gave the valley its name.

"There's the ghost house!" said Will, in a low voice, pointing toward a mansion, perched on one of the side hills, on a natural ledge. "I can see the ghost now!"

"Oh!" screamed Amy.

At that moment from the dense underbrush near the auto there came a loud cry, and some one fairly tumbled down a little declivity into the road—the figure of an old man with long, white hair.

CHAPTER X

OFF ON THE TOUR

GRACE and Amy were in each other's arms. Betty admitted afterward that she wished she had some one to lean on, but she gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles went white with the strain. Mollie clutched the sides of the seat in a grip of something like despair. The boys looked wonderingly at one another, and then at the strange figure that had tumbled out of the bushes.

"Oh, it's the hair-tonic peddler!" exclaimed Mollie a moment later, as she got a glimpse of the man. He had risen and was brushing the dust off his rusty black suit.

"The who?" asked Will.

"A man who sells hair-tonic," explained Betty in a low voice, for the stranger was looking at them now.

"At your service, ladies and gentlemen!" exclaimed the proprietor of Bennington's Hair-Tonic. "I see you remember me," and he smirked at the girls—that hard, and rather cruel,

look never leaving his face, even when he smiled.

"Oh, yes, we remember you," replied Betty, coolly. She now had control of her nerves.

"Don't talk to him too much," advised Allen, in a low voice. "You never can tell who these fellows are, nor what their game is."

"Oh, he's harmless," replied Betty, in a return whisper. "We met him on the road one day, and supplied a bolt that he had lost from his wagon."

"All the same," insisted Will, "he might——"

He was interrupted by Mollie, who asked:

"Where is your wagon?"

"I left it in a secure place," replied the hair tonic man.

"What were you doing up there?" asked Allen, nodding in the direction whence the man had taken his tumble.

"That was an accident," replied Mr. Bennington, who continued to dust his clothes, which seemed to have accumulated considerable of the dirt of the road. "I was up on the hillside gathering the herbs I use in my tonic, when my foot slipped. I heard the auto coming, and I was afraid I might roll under it. That is why I yelled."

"Oh," said Mollie, faintly. "Well, you got on our nerves, Mr. Bennington."

"I am sorry I have nothing for nerves," and the fellow bowed, rather mockingly, it seemed. "I am a specialist in hair. If you would like any of my tonic—something to make your locks like mine," and he shook his own with an air of pride, "why," he resumed, "I am at your service!" Again he bowed.

"I don't think we care for any," answered Allen, who seemed to have, in common with the other boys, taken a dislike to the peddler. "Suppose we go on, Betty."

"Very well," replied the Little Captain at the wheel, as she advanced the gasoline lever. The motor had not ceased running.

"Then I can't sell you any of my Restorer?" called Mr. Bennington, as Betty slowly let in the clutch.

"No," answered Allen, and he glanced back in time to note the fellow making an elaborate bow, his white locks falling about his head in a "shower."

"I don't like him," Frank announced, when they were out of the man's hearing.

"Nor I," added Will.

"Why not? He seems harmless enough," spoke Amy. "Poor man! he probably has a hard time making a living."

"Don't you believe it!" declared Will. "To

my way of thinking, he's a faker. He looked plump and well-fed enough. I warrant you he has no lack of good food. Those fellows put about ten cents worth of alcohol in a bottle, a little perfume and some water, and sell it for a dollar as hair-tonic."

"Well, really some of that stuff must be awful!" exclaimed Grace. "I'm glad I never use it."

"You never have to—nature was good to you," murmured Frank in her ear, whereat Grace blushed.

Mollie glanced back toward Shadow Valley. The gloom over it was increasing, and at the far end could just be discerned the deserted mansion—the remnant of a rich man's folly. About that, too, the shadows seemed to gather, dark and foreboding.

"Ugh! That place gives me the creeps!" Mollie muttered. And against the dusky background of the valley and the old mansion she beheld the figure of the rather mysterious peddler. His white locks stood out in strange contrast to the surrounding darkness, and his black clothes.

"It certainly looks as though it might be haunted," agreed Betty. "Poor Mr. Lagg! I'm afraid he will never get the money he expects

out of that place. It would never do for a sanitarium for nervous wrecks."

"Oh, I don't know," answered Will. "I've been close to it several times, and, I think, by cutting down some of the trees that keep out the sunlight, a good view could be had. Then the place would not be half so depressing. But of course if it gets a reputation of being haunted that will settle it as far as people with weak nerves are concerned. Are you girls going to take up Lagg's offer?"

"We haven't thought of it lately," replied Grace.

"Too busy arranging for our grand tour," added Mollie.

"Well, we fellows may decide to take it up, and get the reward—it would come in handy for vacation money," said Will.

The car was now descending a slope, and soon Shadow Valley was out of sight, as was the strange old mansion. The girls breathed easier, and perhaps the boys did also, for, though nothing had actually occurred, the reputation of the place, and the sudden and startling appearance of the old man, had given them all a thrill.

"This is the second time some one has tumbled out almost under our auto," said Mollie, as they turned on a road toward Deepdale. "The

third time may not be so lucky for them—or for us."

"That's so," agreed Amy. "The first was that girl who disappeared so mysteriously. I wonder what became of her?"

"So do I," spoke Grace.

"And if she ever went back to the mysterious 'him' of whom she talked?" added Betty.

"Perhaps it was her—sweetheart—and they had a quarrel," suggested Will.

"Is it silly to—have a sweetheart?" asked Allen, with a glance at Betty, whose face was then turned toward him. He saw the flush on her cheeks deepen.

"Of course!" declared Mollie.

"No, but it's silly to quarrel with them," said Will. "Isn't it, girls? Especially when they bring you—chocolates."

"It's all some of them are good for!" declared Grace, with a toss of her head.

"Children—children!" said Amy, pleadingly. "Don't be naughty."

"All right—little mother!" promised Will.

"But, seriously, I often think of that girl," went on Mollie. "She seemed very nice, and in such trouble."

"Funny about being up a tree, though," said Will, drily. "Maybe she was one of the orig-

inal tree-dwellers, and reverted to her ancient days."

"You are hopeless," murmured Grace. "Don't encourage him, girls."

"If they don't I'll pine away and go into a gradual decline," said Will, languishingly, trying, unsuccessfully, to put his head on Amy's shoulder.

"Stop it!" she commanded.

"I have it!" cried Frank. "That girl wasn't —well, not to put too fine a point upon it—she wasn't just right in her head. That's why she climbed a tree."

"Poor girl!" spoke Amy. "I hope she found some friends, at any rate," and Amy thought of the mystery surrounding her own life, and how fortunate she had been to find such a good home with Mr. and Mrs. Stonington.

Talking of the recent happening, laughing and joking, the young people were soon in Deepdale, and a little later had separated to their several homes.

As Mollie had said, the details of the tour were now practically settled. Mollie's cousin, Mrs. Jane Mackson, had arranged to accompany the girls as chaperone, and on such times as she could not be with them they were to stop over night at the homes of friends or relatives.

They did not arrange for any definite rules about their trips. It was to be a pleasure jaunt, and at times they would cover more ground than others. Nor were any fixed dates set as to when they would be at certain places. As Mollie aptly expressed it:

"It's so much nicer not to know exactly what you are going to do, and then if anything comes up to make you change your plans you're not disappointed. We're going to be as care-free as we can."

And so the tour was laid out. The girls would take with them suit-cases with sufficient change of raiment to do them until other things could be forwarded from their homes to various designated points. Occasionally they would take a run back to Deepdale to renew necessaries.

The farthest point they would reach would be to visit an aunt of Mollie's in Midvale, about two hundred miles from Deepdale. But this would come at the end of the tour.

"Well, I think we are all ready to start!" exclaimed Mollie one morning, when the three girls, and her cousin, had assembled at her house. "Have you everything you need?"

"Not nearly—but all I can carry," announced Betty.

"No, no, Dodo! Mustn't climb in the car!"

admonished Mollie, for the little girl was endeavoring to do so.

"Dot any tandy?" demanded Paul, possibly as the price of not following his sister's example.

"Ess—us ikes tandy!" cried Dodo, climbing down.

"Oh, Grace, will you kindly oblige again!" begged Mollie, as she took her place at the wheel.

"Certainly," said Grace, sweetly.

The girls were in the car.

"All aboard—we're off!" cried Mollie, and she pressed the self-starter button.

CHAPTER XI

A TRACE OF THE GIRL

"WHEN are you coming back for us?"

"Why don't you take us with you? You may need us to help put on a tire."

"They'll send for us in a day or so!"

Thus called Will, Frank and Allen, who had assembled at Mollie's house to watch their girl friends start on the auto tour.

"If we need you we'll send for you," promised Mollie, as she let slip the clutch pedal. "But I don't believe we shall."

"What—need us—or send for us?" asked Allen, with a laugh. "That is an ambiguous statement."

"I'm not on the witness stand!" retorted Mollie to the young law student.

"Now do be careful; won't you, girls?" pleaded Cousin Jane. a trifle nervously, as the car gathered speed.

"Oh, we're always careful," said Mollie. "Don't fuss, Cousin Jane, or you won't have a

good time." Mollie was too kind to add that neither would her friends have much pleasure, and perhaps Mrs. Mackson realized this, for, though she would clutch nervously at the side of the seat whenever the car jolted or lurched, she said nothing more in the way of caution.

"Brin us some tandy!" called Dodo after the retreating auto.

"Brin 'ots of it!" added Paul.

"Your true disciples, Grace," remarked Amy.

"You can't make me angry," said Grace in cool tones, as she munched a chocolate.

"What's this?" asked Amy, as she felt some long, round, hard object on the floor of the tonneau, amid many others of various sizes and shapes. "It feels like a—bomb."

"It's my bottle," said Grace, with an assumption of dignity. "Leave it alone, please."

"Your bottle?" asked Betty, curiously, turning around.

"Yes. I filled it with cold chocolate—it's a vacuum bottle, you know—and will keep its contents cold a long time. I thought we might be thirsty."

"As if we wouldn't pass a drug store, or some place where we could get a drink," objected Mollie.

"Oh, well, you'll want some sooner or later,"

predicted Grace. "Those chicken sandwiches are very salty, and the olives——"

"They always make me want a drink," said Amy. "I'm real glad you brought it, Grace. You and I love each other; don't we?"

"Cupboard love!" scoffed Mollie. "Never mind, Grace, we'll forgive you."

The boys waved their final farewells, the twins joining in, and some of the relatives of the girls, who had gathered to see them off, shook handkerchiefs or hands.

"Under way at last!" exclaimed Betty, as the car gathered speed. "What did you say our stopping place would be for to-night, Mollie?"

"Freedenburg. There's a nice home-like hotel there, and we can get adjoining rooms. I wrote on and engaged them last week."

"That will be nice. Oh, isn't it glorious!"

They were on the main street of Deepdale now, having to pass through the town to get to the road that led to Freedenburg, which was about seventy-five miles away. They planned to make the town by night.

The main street had been sprinkled to lay the dust, and there were little puddles of water here and there. It was impossible to avoid all of them, and Mollie went into a big one at a crossing. The big-tired wheel threw some muddy

spray and it went far enough to land on the highly-polished shoes of a youth who had paused to let the car pass.

"I beg your pardon!" called out Mollie, for she was going very slowly.

"Well, of all the careless——" began the youth in angry tones.

"Oh, it's Percy Falconer!" gasped Grace. "See Betty."

"I don't want to see!" she answered sharply.

Percy heard his name, and his manner changed as he recognized the girls.

"I beg your pardon!" he cried, as though the accident had been his fault. "It doesn't matter in the least. I was going to get another shine, anyhow. I wish——"

But his further words were lost as the car moved on.

"That was nice of him," said Mollie. "I did spoil his polish, but when he saw Betty he was as nice as pie, though he looked as if he'd like to eat me up a moment before. Betty, you are to be congratulated."

"Don't speak to me of him. I—I——"

"Count ten, slowly," spoke Amy in such mirth-provoking tones that they all laughed. Percy gazed blankly after the retreating car, and then made his way to a boot-blacking stand.

The girls were soon outside the town, bowling along a pleasant country road. The day was perfect, and, as Grace said, they could not have had a better one for their start had it been "made to order." They had plenty of lunch with them, and planned to stop in some convenient spot at noon and eat.

"Oh, I forgot those cheese-crackers!" suddenly cried Betty, when they had gone several miles. "I had them on the hall table, and I'm sure I forgot to put them in."

"Look and see," suggested Mollie.

"No, they're not here," went on Betty, regretfully, after a search. "We're all so fond of them."

"Mr. Lagg keeps them," suggested Grace. "It wouldn't be much out of our way to go to his store."

"We will!" decided Mollie, and she made a turn at the next crossing. Mr. Lagg was glad to see them, as he always was. He bowed and smiled as he came out to the car.

"Ladies, you have come, I see,
To say you'll lay that ghost for me.

"At least I hope so," went on the poetical grocer, with a laugh. "Say you'll undertake that job," he pleaded. "I've tried to get those doctors to take the place, ghost and all, but they

won't, and I'll have it on my hands if I don't look out."

"We can't promise," spoke Mollie. "Maybe the boys—Grace's brother and his chums—will undertake it, Mr. Lagg. If they don't, when we come back from our tour, we'll consider it once more."

"Well, I'll hold you to that!" he declared. "This is getting serious with me."

"Have the doctors made any other move?" asked Betty.

"No, not yet. They asked me if I could guarantee that there would be no queer disturbances, and of course I couldn't so they said they'd have to wait. But they're dickering for another place, and may take it. I wish there was no such things as ghosts."

"There aren't!" declared Mollie, decidedly.

"Then how do you account for what happened in the old mansion?" asked Mr. Lagg.

"Imagination," said Betty.

The storekeeper shook his head.

"A fellow like Pete Skillinger, or some of the fishermen around here, might imagine," he admitted, "but not those scientific doctors. They certainly saw, and heard, something they couldn't explain. They sure did!"

"Did you make any inquiries to be sure they

were not doing this themselves?" asked Mollie. "I've heard of such cases."

"No, these doctors are all well-known men, and have good reputations," said Mr. Lagg, with another puzzled shake of his head. "They wouldn't do such a thing. I don't doubt but what this haunting business can be explained; but how? That's the question. How? I can't solve it—I haven't time—daren't leave my store. Now you girls are smart and brave. The ghost of Elm Island didn't bother you, so why should this one?"

"Oh, well, we'll think about it," promised Mollie. "Now what we most need are cheese crackers—and not ghostly ones, either, Mr. Lagg."

"You shall have the best in stock."

Then, his mind being turned in another channel he recited this:

> "Cheese crackers I have, large and small
> Enough for one—enough for all.
> I've sardines and pickles too,
> My aim is always to please you."

"And you generally hit what you aim at," laughed Grace. "I think I'll have a few more chocolates," she added, as she inspected her box. "These won't last all day, and I know yours are good, Mr. Lagg."

"I'll bring them out," he said, as he hurried into the store.

The girls bought a few other things they found they had overlooked in starting off, and once more they got under way.

"Don't forget the ghost!" pleaded Mr. Lagg, as he waved farewell. "Get rid of it for me."

"Poor old man—he really means it," said Amy. "I wonder what can be in that house?"

"Bats and rats, most likely," said "Cousin Jane," as they all called her. "Bats and rats!"

"Worse than spooks—when they get in your hair," spoke Mollie. "Give me a nice clean ghost, that waltzes around in a two-step. Oh, girls, I hope we can go to a dance of two on our tour."

"Some are planned for us," said Mollie.

They kept on, enjoying the ride to the utmost. Just before noon they got a puncture, and voted not to attend to it until after lunch, which they ate near a road-side spring, under a great oak tree. And then the Fates were kind to them. For, as they were laboriously jacking up the car to take off the tire, a lone chauffeur, in a big car, came along and kindly offered to do the work for them.

The girls gladly accepted, and watched him carefully, for though they had once or twice be-

fore changed a shoe, they were not skillful at it. Mollie offered the man some change, but he declined with a laugh and reddened under his tan.

"Then do have some lunch!" said Betty, understanding his embarrassment.

"And chocolates," added Grace, generously.

"I will," he said. "It's hard work driving a big car like mine—all alone."

"Oh, is it *your* car?" asked Mollie. "I thought——" and as the young man nodded she understood why he had refused the money. He was the owner.

"Oh, girls!" exclaimed Mollie, when he had gone, "and to think that I wanted to pay him—maybe he's a millionaire."

"You meant it all right," said Betty. "And really he looked like a professional chauffeur. He might have taken the money, and let us think so. I read a story once where a man did that, and fell in love with a girl, and——"

"Spare us the details," begged Grace.

Again the girls were off, and without further accident, save that when Betty was driving she narrowly missed running over a persistent barking dog. They reached Freedenburg, and went to the hotel, leaving the auto at a public garage near by.

"Oh, for a good bath, and a hot cup of tea!"

exclaimed Mollie, for the latter part of the ride had been rather hot and dusty. "Then we'll feel like new girls."

The services of a maid were at their disposal in their rooms, and they were soon making themselves fresh for the dinner that was shortly to be served. As Mollie let down her long hair the maid uttered an exclamation:

"Excuse me, Miss, for remarking it," she said, "but you have lovely hair."

"We all think so," added Betty.

"It isn't so very nice," spoke Mollie. "I am hoping it will get thicker."

"It's lovely!" the maid insisted. "I haven't seen any as nice—not since a strange girl stopped here one night some time ago, and I helped her do hers up. Hers was nearly to the floor when she stood up. And it was just the color of yours. She had a scar on her forehead, I remember—a recent one, and I had to be careful of it as I combed her hair."

"A cut?" asked Betty, looking at her friends curiously.

"Yes, Miss. She said she had fallen out of a tree."

"A tree!" The four girls uttered this together.

"Why, yes," and the maid seemed surprised.

"I suppose she was playing—she said she was very fond of sports—and she was just the age to enjoy them."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Betty eagerly. "Did she have—I mean what was her name—or could you describe her to us? We have a reason for asking."

"Why, I don't recall that she gave me her name," said the maid slowly, "but I can tell you how she looked."

Then, to the surprise of Betty and her chums, the hotel maid gave a good description of the girl they had seen fall out of the tree some time before—the girl who had so strangely disappeared when they went after aid for her.

"It's the same one!" cried Betty, and then she told the maid of the coincidence.

CHAPTER XII

A DISABLED CAR

"WHERE did she go?"

"Didn't she leave her name—or anything?"

"Did she seem all right?"

"Did she tell why she was in the tree?"

With these questions the girls fairly bombarded the mystified maid when they had established, beyond all reasonable doubt, that the girl they had aided and the one at the hotel were one and the same.

"I don't know where she went," the maid finally managed to say, "and I don't know her name. It may be on the register, though."

"We'll look!" declared Betty. "But did you learn anything about her?"

"Nothing much. She seemed all right, as far as her health was concerned, but she did not seem happy. The cut on her head was nothing. I asked her if the fall from the tree had hurt her, and she said not much."

"Did she say why she climbed up it?" asked Amy.

"No, Miss, she did not."

"And she didn't tell you anything about herself?" It was Grace who asked this.

"No, only in a general way. I thought, from what she said, Miss, that she had seen trouble, and was trying to get away from it. She was well dressed, and had some money. She let fall that she was traveling about, trying to find some friends she had lost track of. There was some mystery about her, of that I'm certain."

"I am too," declared Mollie. "Poor girl!"

"I'm going to look at the register," said Betty. "That may give us a clue, as the boys say."

The girls dressed for dinner, and then visited the hotel office. The maid fortunately had a good memory, and could tell the date of the girl's stay. The register of that day contained several names, but the clerk recalled the incident of the girl applying for a room. This hotel made a speciality of catering to women patrons.

"That's her name," said the young man, pointing to one in the book. "Carrie Norton."

"And it doesn't say where she is from," remarked Amy.

"I asked her about that," spoke the clerk, "and she said it did not matter. So I did not insist."

"Carrie Norton," mused Mollie, as the girls

went into the dining room. "Well, I hope she has found her friends. Poor girl!"

They talked and speculated about her, but that was all they could do. They could arrive at no conclusion. It was plain that she had not been as badly hurt as they had feared, and, after leaving the farm house, must have gone to some other place of shelter. She must have also changed her garments, for the dress the maid described was not the one she wore at the time of the accident.

She had left the hotel, after stopping there one night, the maid said, and had left no directions for any mail to be forwarded, nor had she given any clue to where she was going.

"She seems to have come into our lives in a most mysterious way," said Mollie, "and then to have vanished. We get a glimpse of her, as it were, and again she vanishes. I wonder if we will ever solve the mystery?"

"Perhaps she is—the ghost of the haunted mansion of Shadow Valley," suggested Betty.

"What an idea!" cried Grace. "Don't be so —shivery!"

"Well, she is as mysterious as ghosts are supposed to be," Betty went on. "I wonder when we will meet her again?"

"When we do, we must take care that she does

not escape without telling us more about herself," said Amy. "Not that we can insist, but we ought to know for our own satisfaction."

"I think so, too," added Mollie. "She is getting on my nerves."

"Besides, we might be able to help her," spoke Grace. "It is dreadful to think of a nice girl like that going the country, friendless and alone. She may need just the aid we could give her."

All the conclusion the girls could come to was that the girl, after leaving the farm house, had somehow managed to find those who were able to look after her. Then had come an interim, which was a blank as far as the girls were concerned. Then came the hotel episode, and—another blank.

"It's like one of those missing-piece puzzles," complained Grace. "We'll never get it straightened out."

"We may," said Betty, more hopefully.

That evening, with Cousin Jane to accompany them, they went to a pretty little play, enjoying it very much. Morning saw them on the road again, and they stopped the next night at the house of a distant relative of Betty's mother.

Then, for a time, the good luck the girls had had left them. There came a spell of rain that lasted two days, and they remained in the house of Mrs. Nelson's relative—rather miserable days

they were, too, for there was little to occupy them. But all things come to an end finally, and the bad weather was no exception.

The sun came out, the roads dried up, and one pleasant morning saw the outdoor girls again in the car, speeding onward. Their objective point was Wendell City, and to reach this they had to make a detour that would take them through a picturesque part of the country.

In fact it was so picturesque, and there were so many fine views, that Mollie stopped the car oftener than she meant to, and in consequence they were far behind their schedule when it began to grow dusk.

"Something is the matter with the car," said Mollie, after a climb of a steep hill, which had to be taken on second gear.

"Oh, don't say that!" begged Grace. "We've got a good way to go, yet."

"Oh, it isn't anything serious, I think," said Mollie. "But one of the cylinders seems to be 'missing.' There, hear it!" she exclaimed. The girls were expert enough to detect the "miss," now. It was unmistakable.

The auto faltered on top of the hill. Then it went down and on the level seemed to be all right again. The girls were more hopeful, until the next hill was reached. There the car nearly

stalled. But the summit was reached, and there appeared in view a long, easy, downward slope.

And then, with a sigh and a groan of protest —which manifestations had been accumulating of late, the car suddenly ceased working, and came to a stop. The power was gone.

"Oh dear!" cried Mollie, for it was getting late, and the road was a lonely one. "What shall we do?"

"Get out and fix it, of course," answered practical Betty.

"Look—look where we are," whispered Grace, clutching the arm of Mollie.

"Where? Don't be so nervous. Where are we?"

"Near the rear entrance to Shadow Valley," spoke Grace, in an awe-struck voice.

CHAPTER XIII

THE STORM

SILENCE followed an exclamation that came from the lips of each of the girls—an involuntary cry from each one, brought out by the words of Grace.

"Shadow Valley!" murmured Mollie.

"And the—the——" it was Betty who began this, it being her evident intention to make a remark about the haunted house. Then her usual good sense came to her rescue, and she refrained. There was pressure enough now on the nerves of her chums, she reasoned.

"Well, what of it?" she asked in a voice meant to be cheerful, and Betty was an adept at simulation under necessity.

"Don't—don't you understand?" faltered Grace, in a low voice—a tone calculated to add to the tenseness of the situation, rather than to relieve it.

"I understand that our car has balked for some reason or other," said Betty in brisk, business-

like tones, "and we have to fix it. If we don't we are likely to be caught in a thunder storm. So get out, girls, and let's hunt for trouble. Grace, if you have any chocolates left you might offer them as a prize for the one who first discovers the difficulty—and why the motor won't mote. Cousin Jane will be the—stake-holder is the proper term, I believe."

"The idea!" cried Mollie. "That's only when there is betting. We don't do anything like that."

"I meant to say prize-holder then!" admitted Betty, with a laugh.

"Well, there's no use discussing it—I haven't a chocolate left," sighed Grace. "But oh, do you realize our position?'

"I do indeed, and that's why I say we must make this car go," went on Betty. "Come," and she got out, followed by Mollie. "It seems hard lines to get a thunder storm after all the rain we've had, but it is threatening. Let's get busy."

"I think that suggestion very practical," said Mrs. Mackson. "Girls, you had better do as Betty says and try to find out what is the matter with the car. I don't know anything about such things or I'd help. If a hairpin will be of any use I have an extra paper of them with me."

"Hairpins! Oh, dear!" laughed Amy half hysterically. "A hairpin to mend a broken auto!"

"I have known one to be of service on a motor boat," spoke Betty. "I bent it in the shape of a spring, and used it on a valve in the *Gem*."

"I'm afraid there's more than that the matter here," spoke Mollie, as she raised the hood of her car. "That one cylinder must have affected the others, in some way."

"Gracious!" exclaimed Amy, "I didn't know auto diseases were catching in that way. We must be careful, girls."

"It's getting darker," observed Betty. "We must be quick Mollie, if we're to get to shelter before the storm breaks."

It was growing dark and gloomy, and though it was not yet seven o'clock the lowering clouds had added to the dusk of approaching night. Occasionally, in the distance, could be heard the low rumbling of thunder.

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Grace. "We are in for a drenching, that's sure."

"Not necessarily!" said Mollie, a bit sharply. "I'd remind you that my car has a top, and we can put it up."

"That's all right," spoke Betty, soothingly, for she noted that Mollie's temper might get the best

of her under the stress of the trouble. "Let's look at the engine first. Shall I light the lamps, Mollie?"

"Yes, do. I didn't think of them. Light the oil ones as well as switch on the electrics. We may need both, and I am not sure of that storage battery. The last place I had it looked at the man said it would need re-charging soon."

While Betty, with the aid of Grace, set the oil and electric head lamps aglow, and saw that the tail light was also in service, Mollie was peering at the motor.

"Just push the self-starter button," she directed Betty after a moment, during which she had primed the cylinders with gasoline, and changed the adjustment of the carbureter slightly. She had really made quite a study of the troubles that might beset a motor, and the garage man had added some further instructions.

Mollie watched while Betty pushed the lever, and set the electric starter in motion, but when the gasoline and spark levers were set at the proper places, the motor did not respond, the fly wheel merely revolving under the impulse of the starter.

"What is it?" asked Grace. "Can you tell what is the matter?"

"No, I can't!" and Mollie spoke shortly. "I'll

tell you as soon as I've found out," she said. "Please don't make me nervous, Grace—dear." Mollie added the last as a polite concession.

"Nervous! If anyone is more nervous than I am, I'd like to know it," murmured Grace. "Oh, how I wish I had a chocolate!" and she hurriedly sought among her possessions, but in vain.

"I wonder how we happened to get here—at the entrance to Shadow Valley?" queried Amy. "I thought we were far away from it."

"We are far enough from the other end," replied Grace. "I guess Mollie didn't know this road took us here, or she wouldn't have come. We are nearer—nearer the—oh, you know what I mean, Amy."

"Yes, you mean—that house!"

"That's it. I—I hate to mention it. But we are nearer to it than ever since—since Mr. Lagg told us about the—the trouble there. I wish we were—back home. Gracious—what's that?" and she jumped nervously, clutching Amy's arm.

"Only thunder—a sharper clap than usual—don't be a goose!" said Betty, sharply. "Shall I try it again, Mollie?" for Mollie was still inspecting the motor by the light of one of the oil lamps held over it by Cousin Jane, while Betty was at the steering wheel, manipulating the levers.

"Yes, try it once more. I can't seem to see what is the matter. The ignition seems to be all right, but when you throw in the gas, and set the spark, the motor doesn't take it up. Try again."

Again Betty tried, but the fly wheel would only revolve, and that was all.

"It's no use!" sighed Mollie. "I'll have to have a garage man look at it. Probably it's some simple little thing. That's generally the way—it's the little things of life that make so much trouble. You can fight a big thing better."

"But where will you find a garage man around here—and at this time of night?" asked Amy, for it was really night now, with the clouds adding to the darkness.

"I don't know, I'm sure," and Mollie's voice did not have its usual pleasant note. "Maybe one will come along in an airship," she added a bit sarcastically.

"Mollie," spoke Betty soothingly.

"I don't care—I don't like foolish questions asked of me when I'm worried."

"I didn't mean to bother you," said Amy gently.

"Oh, I know it!" and Mollie's voice trembled. "It was horribly mean of me to answer you as I did. I beg your pardon, but I am *so* bothered!

Isn't it mean to have things go wrong this way, and at such an inconvenient time and place?"

"Never mind," spoke Betty, laughing. "To-morrow we will only think this was fun. And now I suggest that we go down the road a bit, and look for a garage. It's true that this isn't a main highway, but nowadays even the country blacksmiths are calling themselves auto repairers. We may come upon one unexpectedly, and if his shop is closed he may live near enough so that we can get him out here. Let's try, anyhow."

"Betty, dear, you're such a comfort!" exclaimed Mollie, putting her arms around her chum. "Come, we'll go on a hunting expedition."

"All of us?" asked Grace.

"No, there's no need for all of us to go," said Betty. "Mollie and I will take a lantern—one of the oil ones—and walk down the road. The rest of you can stay here."

"And I think you'd better put the top up while we are gone," suggested Mollie. "It may rain suddenly, and with the top and the side curtains and wind-shield in front, we can at least keep dry until morning."

"What! Stay here all night?" cried Amy.

"Why not? Where else can we go?"

"I'll not stay," declared Grace. "I'll walk

anywhere—even in the rain—to get away from—this place," and she could not repress a shudder as she looked back over her shoulder at the entrance to gloomy Shadow Valley.

Betty again took her position at the wheel—why, she hardly knew. Mollie had closed the bonnet over the motor, evidently giving up trying to discover the trouble. Idly Betty pushed on the button and lever of the self-starter, and then she exclaimed:

"I have it!"

"What! Have you found the trouble?" asked Mollie, excitedly.

"No, but I have a plan. We can run the car down to the foot of the slope. It's more sheltered there—bigger trees, you know—and we'll be that much nearer where we want to go."

"But how can you make the car go—when it won't?" asked Mollie.

"The self-starter! It's guaranteed to run the car under electric power for nearly a mile, without the motor being operated. All we'll have to do will be to set the starter going—that turns the fly wheel, you know. Then we can put in low gear, slip in the clutch, just as if the motor was in operation, and get the car to the top of the hill. We're really at the top now, for it's level here. But we can get it to the edge of the downward

slope, and let it coast. Then, on the next level, we can do the same thing again. In that way I am almost sure we can make over a mile."

"Good!" cried Mollie. "You should have a car instead of me, Bet, my dear!"

"Oh, I don't take any credit for that think! I just recalled an advertisement I had read about self-starters. Nearly all of them say the starters alone will propel the car for some distance. Let's try it, anyhow."

They all felt better on hearing this, and Amy even laughed. She started to get into the car, when Betty said:

"Perhaps it will be just as well to wait about getting in until the car is at the beginning of the slope. The less weight in the auto the easier it will move. Mollie, do you want to try the scheme?"

"No, you do it—you thought of it. We'll walk along with you if you get it to go."

Betty soon demonstrated that she could get the auto to move, and slowly but surely it rolled along until it had started down a long, gentle slope. Then Betty shut off the electric motor, which was run by a storage battery, and applied the brakes.

"Get in now," she directed, and a little later

the party was coasting down hill, the foot brake serving to prevent too great speed.

"So far—so good!" cried Betty, when they had reached the level. "Now to see how far the starter will carry us."

As she spoke a more vivid flash of lightning, and a rumbling crash of thunder, made all the girls, and even Cousin Jane, jump.

"We're going to get it!" predicted Grace, with a shiver.

Betty again repeated her operation with the starter. The car went forward slowly, and the girls were very hopeful, and then suddenly the auto came to a stop with a sort of whining groan, and the electric lights went out.

"Oh, dear! What's happened now?" asked Amy.

"The storage battery has given out," said Mollie. "I was afraid it would. Now, girls, we'll either have to stay here in the auto, or else walk—and be caught in the rain."

"Well, let's get the top up, at all events," suggested Betty. "Then we'll be sure of some shelter."

It began to rain, gently at first, even while they were struggling with the rather refractory top, in the dim light of the two oil lamps. But they managed to get it in place. Then, as they were

fastening the side curtains, the storm burst in all its fury, with a suddenness that was almost terrifying.

Grace and Amy, who were trying to fasten a curtain on the side of the auto whence the wind came, screamed and let go of the flap. In an instant, so powerful was the wind, it had ripped off the curtain, sending it scurrying away in the blackness of the night, that was torn and pierced by frequent flashes of lightning.

"Now we have done it!" cried Grace. "Oh, Mollie, I'm so sorry!"

"Never mind! Don't talk about that now. Get on your raincoats, girls, or you'll be drenched!" and, fastening the last strap of her curtain, Mollie donned her garment—the girls and Mrs. Mackson carrying them in a seat locker that Mollie had utilized for this purpose.

But the rain came in at the place where there was no side curtain, sweeping over them all. The wind blew fiercely, and the auto swayed in the blast. Miserable indeed was the plight of the Outdoor Girls. They were possibly having just a little too much of out doors.

CHAPTER XIV

AT THE HAUNTED HOUSE

"GIRLS, I can't stand this any longer!" complained Mollie, as the storm raged about and above them.

"What are you going to do?" asked Betty.

"For one thing, let's try to take one of the curtains from the side where the wind doesn't blow so hard, and fasten it on the place where that one blew away. That will help some."

They tried, but it was hard work. The curtains fastened with straps above and below, being a new kind, and not very satisfactory, as Mollie declared then and there. Nor were the girls successful, for the wind whipped and blew the curtain about so that it was impossible to put it up. Thus there were two openings now—one on either side of the auto—and rain came in both.

"This is dreadful!" cried Mollie. "Girls, I'm sure you'll never forgive me for getting you into this scrape."

"It wasn't your fault," said Betty. "You couldn't tell that the motor was going to give

out. Besides, what if we are wet? It isn't very cold, and we'll get dry some time. Oh, but that was a heavy one!" she cried, pressing her hands over her ears as a tremendous peal of thunder followed closely after a vivid flash.

"We must do something!" cried Mollie. "This is unbearable."

"But what are you going to do?" asked Grace. "It looks to me as though we'd just have to bear it."

"We can get out and walk until we find some kind of shelter," said Mollie. "There must be some sort of house around here. This place isn't a desert. And even walking in the rain and mud is better than staying here, all cramped up, and drenched. Who will come?"

"I guess we all will, if one of us goes," spoke Betty. "But, oh, Mollie, are you sure that's the best thing to do?"

"Why not? What else can we do?"

"Well, of course if this storm would let up it would be easier going out then. We might wait a while."

"It doesn't show any signs of letting up," retorted Mollie. "It acts to me like an all-night rain, and the longer we wait the worse off we'll be, and the less chance we'll have of finding any one up if we do locate a house."

"Oh, for a nice dry house, and a good hot cup of chocolate!" sighed Grace.

"Heartless creature—to even dream of such things!" cried Amy. "Oh dear! What do you think? A stream of water is going down my back."

"And both my shoulders are soaking wet," added Mrs. Mackson. "But it might be worse, girls!"

"I don't very well see how, remarked Mollie. "Well, shall we try it?"

The others hesitated a moment. As they waited and listened to the whining of the wind, the swish of the rain and the angry muttering of the thunder, and saw the vivid lightning, it was no wonder they did not want to decide hurriedly to go out in that out burst of the elements. But it was also trying on the nerves to stay in the stalled auto, exposed as it was by the lack of side curtains.

"Oh, let's try it!" suggested Betty in sheer desperation. "We can't any more than get drenched, and our rain coats will be some protection. Come on, girls."

They had the two oil lanterns in the car with them, and carrying them they now emerged from their shelter.

"Gracious! This is awful!" gasped Mollie.

as the blast and rain struck her full in the face.

"Keep on!" called Betty, grimly.

"Which way?" asked Amy. "How dark it is!"

"Not when it lightens—that's one good thing about it," said Cousin Jane, cheerfully.

"It's nice you can see some good points," laughed Mollie—yes, actually laughed, and the girls marveled at it. But Mollie had that rare quality of "keeping her nerve," if I may be pardoned that expression, so often and effectively used by my friends, the boys.

"We had better go forward," suggested Betty. "We didn't pass any houses for quite a while as we were coming up here, and there may be one not far off just ahead. Or we may find a cross-road. Advance, I say!'

"And I agree," spoke Mollie. "Come on."

She and Betty led the way, carrying the lamps, which gave but an uncertain light, and that only in one direction—forward. However, the road, though now quite muddy, was a level one, and in fairly good condition.

Forward they tramped through the rain. It is on such occasions as these—when something goes wrong, upsetting all prearranged plans, and making life seem miserable—that true courage of a sort, comradeship, good-fellowship and real grit

are best shown. And, to the credit of the outdoor girls be it said that, now they had taken the "plunge" none of them showed the white feather. They were brave under any circumstances and this very bravery strengthened their tired nerves.

On they splashed through muddy puddles, protecting themselves from the rain as best they could by their coats. But occasionally the wind would whip them open, letting in the moisture that already had soaked the garments well.

"There doesn't seem to be any shelter," remarked Amy, hopelessly, when they had gone perhaps half a mile.

"Oh, don't give up yet," suggested Mollie.

They kept on, and came to a cross-road.

"Now which way?" asked Betty.

"Straight ahead," proposed Mollie.

"To the left," offered Grace.

"The right," was Amy's choice.

"I think—I'm not sure, but I think I see a light off to the left," said Cousin Jane.

"A light!" cried Betty. Then we ought to head for that."

"But I am not certain," went on Mrs. Mackson. "Look, girls, is that a light?"

They grouped around her, and gazed in the direction she pointed.

"Hold the lamps the other way, and we can see better," suggested Grace.

"Hold the lens against your skirts, Mollie," said Betty. "That will make dark-lanterns for us."

She and Mollie did this, and in the intense blackness, that, for the moment was not illuminated by a lightning flash, they peered about them.

"It *is* a light!" exclaimed Grace. "Thank goodness!"

"I think so, too," added Mollie, as she glimpsed a point of illumination. "Come on, girls! They won't refuse to help us."

Much encouraged they kept on. The rain increased, but they did not so much care now. The thunder was just as hard, and the flashes of heaven's fire was vivid, while the wind seemed more powerful. But they kept on. The light they had seen seemed to grow brighter. Then it suddenly disappeared.

"Oh dear!" cried Grace, despairingly. "It is gone!"

"Never mind," said Mollie. "They may have taken it to another room, or put it out to go to bed. But we can find the place, as long as we are on the right road."

On they stumbled, and then Betty, who was a little in the advance gave a cry— a cry of joy.

"Here is the house!" she cried. "It is all dark, but we will knock."

By the lightning flashes they saw, set some distance back from the road, a large house. By the same flashes they saw leading up to it a path, much overgrown with weeds. And back of the house were big trees. The rest was not very distinct, but at least shelter was offered them.

"Come on!" urged Betty, resolutely.

"Suppose there are—dogs?" faltered Amy.

"If there are they would have barked before now. But I don't believe even a self-respecting dog would bother us on a night like this," said Mollie. "Come on."

They advanced up the old path, that was overgrown with weeds.

"I don't believe any one lives there," ventured Grace, in a low voice.

"If they do they don't keep the place in very good condition," spoke Cousin Jane. "It's a shame to let it get so run down."

Mollie was knocking on the door. The sound of her knuckles seemed to echo through an empty house. The hearts of the girls were despairing again. Once more Mollie knocked. No answer.

"No one at home," she murmured. "And yet the light!"

She gave a little cry.

"What is it?" asked Betty.

"The door—it opened of itself!"

"Nonsense! Perhaps it was not shut, and you pushed it!"

Betty flashed her light forward. It shone on the old door, that was slowly swinging open, seemingly of its own accord. Then a bare and deserted hall was observed.

At that moment there came a vivid lightning flash, and before the thunder could echo Grace cried:

"We're at the haunted house of Shadow Valley!"

CHAPTER XV

QUEER MANIFESTATIONS

CURIOUSLY enough it was gentle Amy who made a remark that saved the day—or should I say night? For it was after dark.

As the girls literally shivered, following the exclamation of Grace—shivered as much from the chilling rain as from the terror induced—Amy said, with such a queer intonation:

"Do you suppose that door opened itself to invite us in?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Grace giggled, Betty caught her breath in a gasp, Mollie went into a perfect gale of laughter, and Cousin Jane—well, she said it herself afterward—she snickered.

"Amy, that's the most sensible thing I've heard since this series of midnight adventures began," declared Mollie.

"And since the door did open to let us in, suppose we take advantage of it," suggested Betty, "and go in."

"What—into the—the haunted house!" and Grace's voice was shrill.

"Now see here!" began Betty, and her voice was as severe as she could make it, for she recognized that now was the time to get the situation well in hand. "This house is no more haunted than you are, Grace Ford."

"But—but——"

"'But me no buts,'" quoted Betty, merrily—as merrily as possible under the circumstances. "We are going to be sensible—and—go in."

Suiting the action to the word she advanced into the hall, through which the wind was now sweeping in rather mournful gusts. Mollie hesitated a moment, and then followed her chum. The action of the two leaders with the lanterns had a good effect on the others.

This might have been accounted for in two ways. The presence of Betty and Mollie in the hall may have had its effect, or the kindly lights of the auto, glowing so cozily, disclosed a shelter that, whatever its disadvantages, at least afforded dryness.

Then, too, the taking away of the lights from the three of the party who remained outside may have added to the effect. At any rate Grace stepped into the hall, followed by Cousin Jane, and then timid Amy, finding herself alone on the small porch, scurried in.

"Well, we're here!" said Betty, with a smile—

rather a pale effort to tell the truth, but a smile nevertheless. "Now what is the next thing to do?"

"If we had only brought something to eat," sighed Grace. "And our chocolate outfit!" for they carried one, with a small alcohol stove, that they might make a hot drink when they stopped at noon for luncheon.

"No use crying over missing chocolate," said Mollie. "We're here, under shelter, anyhow; and we can keep dry. Now if we can find anyone at home we'll beg their hospitality for the night. Maybe they can get us a meal—if we pay for it."

"There's no one living in this house—I'm sure of that!" declared Amy. "Smell the musty odor—and—see——" she pushed open a door leading from the hall, and directed Betty's hand so that the lantern flashed inside. The room was bare and empty. "No one at all," she insisted. "The house is deserted."

"Well, so much the better," declared Grace. "That is, if there are no—no——" she did not finish, but looked around rather apprehensively.

"Ghosts—say it!" commanded Betty, sharply. "The oftener you use the word the less it will frighten you."

"Look here!" exclaimed Mollie. "I don't

believe we're in the —the haunted house at all."

"Why not?" demanded Grace.

"Because this isn't at all like the kind of a house a millionaire would build. It's—common. You can see for yourselves."

It did indeed seem so.

"But we were close to the end of Shadow Valley, where Kenyon's Folly was built," insisted Grace, "and we turned in nearer to it when we took that cross-road. I'm sure it's the place."

"Well, it's a queer thing to be insisting that you are in a haunted house," remarked Betty, "but I am beginning to believe now that we are not. At least I agree with Mollie that this doesn't look at all like the place called Kenyon's Folly."

As the storm thundered and roared about them the girls looked around the hall and room. Truly it was but a poor structure, much fallen into decay now, yet at heart it was sound. Paint and decoration would do much to restore it.

"I think I can explain it," said Amy.

"Do then," begged Grace.

"Don't you remember, Mr. Lagg told us that there was a housekeeper's residence built to connect with the main structures?" she said. "There is a sort of covered passage, I believe, that goes to the main castle, as it were."

"Then the real haunted house must be—back

there," and Grace pointed toward where they had observed the thick trees.

"Yes. We are only in the—annex," said Betty. "But it suits me."

"If we only had something to eat and drink we would—annex that," observed Grace. "I'm starved!"

"Let's have a look around, anyhow, as long as we are here," suggested Mollie. "We may as well stay here for the night——"

"For the night!" cried Grace.

"Yes. Where else can we go? I'm not going out in that storm again if I can help it. We're dry here, at least. Just listen to that rain!"

"It's coming down in torrents!" exclaimed Betty. "We simply can't go out."

"And it will give us something to do to explore a bit," added Mrs. Mackson. "Come along girls. Who knows but what we may find a table all set for us by fairy hands, as we used to read of in the story books?"

They paused for a moment. Not a sound came from the rooms and passage about them. Only the storm raged outside.

"Well, let's—let's——" began Mollie.

"Oh, come on!" cried Betty, as her chum hesitated. "At least we have lights."

"And I'm going to take off my wet coat," said Grace.

"Oh, if we could have a fire!"

"There's a fire place," said Betty, flashing her lamp into the room the door of which Amy had opened. "And, I do declare, some old boards and boxes! Why can't we have a fire?"

The idea appealed to all of them, and presently, taking heart, they entered the room, and piling some boxes, splintered boards and papers on the old hearth, set them ablaze.

As the ruddy flames leaped up the broad chimney they gathered about, much cheered, though still hungry.

"If we only had something to eat," sighed Grace. "I wonder, if by chance the former inhabitants left some morsels of food? Suppose we take a look?"

The others hesitated a moment, and then Mollie said:

"I'm with you!"

She caught up the still-glowing auto lamp, and led the way, the others following.

"Up stairs; or down stairs?" she challenged.

"Or in my lady's chamber?" completed Betty, with a laugh.

They went thorugh various rooms. All were deserted. Here and there they saw discarded and

broken furniture. But there was no sign of recent habitation. The house was musty and damp, but they were glad of shelter from the storm.

"Only my poor auto!" sighed Mollie. "I hope nothing happens to it."

"It can stand the weather," said Grace. "What is beyond here, I wonder?" she said, as they came to a pause before a closed door.

"Let's look," suggested Betty.

Like other portals in the house this one was not locked. Betty pushed it open, and a long passage was releaved.

"The way to—the haunted house!" exclaimed Mollie, rather dramatically.

"Hush!" begged Grace.

"Silly!" admonished Betty. "Come on."

She plunged into the passage. The echoing footsteps of the others following could be heard. She came to another door, opened it, and gave a cry of delight.

"Girls—supper!" she exclaimed, and, holding her light high up, she flashed it on a collection of groceries. Boxes of sardines there were, dried herring, crackers, some butter in a carton, a loaf of bread, canned tomatoes and peaches, and with all some dishes—knives and forks, spoons, and, most useful of all—a can-opener, and a corkscrew—and—a bottle of olives!

"Oh joy!" exclaimed Grace. "The fairy prince has been here!"

"Grace!" remonstrated Amy, as her friend caught up the bottle of olives and proceeded to open it. "We don't know whose they are."

"So much the better; our consciences won't trouble us. And if anyone comes to claim them we can pay for what we eat—I have money!" and she jingled her silver purse, "And now, 'let good digestion wait on appetite, and health on both,'" she quoted. "Fall to!"

The girls laughed, but they did "fall to." Cans and tins were opened, crackers and slices of bread spread, and with peach juice to drink, for they did not like to draw any water, fearing it might not be fresh—they ate—and ate—and ate again.

"Oh, how good I feel!" cried Grace, as there came a pause.

"But how in the world do you imagine this stuff got here?" asked Amy.

"Why seek to inquire?" spoke Mollie. "That it is here is sufficient for me. Another olive, Betty, dear?"

"The—our friend the ghost may have provided it," said Grace.

"You are coming on bravely," commented Betty. "If you will——"

She paused—they all did—mouths half opened. For from somewhere in the structure came a hollow and terrifying groan, and then followed the umistakable sound of clinking metal, while a bluish light flashed around them. Then came another long-drawn cry—a shrill, eerie wail, and both their lights went out, leaving them in total darkness, while the storm shrieked about the old house, rocking it, and swaying it as though to tear it from its foundations.

CHAPTER XVI

"SO YOU HAVE COME BACK!"

SCREAMS and frightened exclamations on the part of the girls followed the queer manifestations. Even Cousin Jane gave a cry of alarm, and clung to Betty. In fact, everyone was clinging to some one else, the table having been deserted at the first alarm.

There was silence for a moment—no, not altogether a silence, for the noise of the storm indicated that it was not in the least lessening, but there was comparative quiet in the room, and then again came that strange bluish, flickering glare, and the metallic clanging sound. Then there was that startling, hollow groan, that seemed to echo and re-echo through the deserted house.

"Oh! Oh!" moaned Grace. "This is awful —terrible!"

It was sufficiently terrible there in the darkness, illuminated only by the lightning, or by that weird blue glare that seemed to come from no place in particular, but which shone through

the whole room—throwing into ghastly outlines the faces of the girls.

Their lamps had gone out—or been blown out—they did not know which, and as they clung to each other, their hearts pounding, every startled nerve on the alert, Amy gasped:

"What—what made the lights go out? Can anyone tell?"

Even then, Betty confessed afterward, she felt a hysterical desire to propound the old question of where a certain Biblical personage was when the light went out, but instead Grace answered before her:

"They were blown out by—by——" she hesitated.

"By the wind!" exclaimed Mollie, quickly. "What else? There's an awful draught in here. Who has the matches?"

It was the most sensible thing she could have said under the circumstances, and it somewhat relieved the tension.

"I have some," answered Grace. "But—but what has happened, anyhow?"

"It's the thunder and lightning," declared Cousin Jane. "It must have struck somewhere around here. It hit our barn once, and I noticed something the same as now. Maybe that put out the lights."

"Well, let's put them in service again," proposed Betty. "I don't like the dark."

"Neither do I—in here," spoke Mollie. "Please strike a match, Grace."

The interior of the old house was quiet now, as with fingers that would tremble in spite of her efforts to still them, Grace lighted a match, and applied the flickering flame to the wick of one of the lamps which Betty opened. Then, as the cheerful yellow glow shone around them, Amy cried:

"Oh, smell that sulphur!"

There was the unmistakable odor in the rather close air of the room.

"It's from the match," said Mollie.

"No, I didn't use a sulphur match," said Grace.

"It's the lightning," declared Cousin Jane. "I noticed that smell, too, when our barn was struck, and I felt as if pins and needles were sticking in me."

"Gracious! I hope that doesn't happen here!" exclaimed Betty, as she helped Grace light the other lantern. Then the girls looked at one another. From the faces they glanced to the table. Nothing there had been altered, nor had the room changed in appearance.

"Well, I'm glad it's over," said Betty with a sigh of relief. "I was certainly scared at first."

"So was I," admitted Mollie. "I really thought it was—the ghost."

Grace let out a startled cry.

"Stop it!" commanded the Little Captain.

"Well, I wish she wouldn't—blurt it out that way," Grace complained.

"Let's finish the meal," suggested Mollie. "There is some left, and there's no telling when the owner—or owners—may come along. If we've eaten it all up they can't do any more than make us pay for it, which we are perfectly willing to do. But if there's some food still left they might stop us from eating it. So let's begin again, girls."

"I've had all I want," faltered Grace.

"She's sorry because there are no chocolates," laughed Betty.

"No, I'm just too nervous to eat any more," said the tall, willowy one. "Oh, wasn't it awful? Those groans—the clanking of chains——"

"How do you know they were chains?" challenged Betty.

"Well, they sounded like them, anyhow."

"That's what we thought on Elm Island, and you know how that turned out."

"Oh, well, yes; but this is different," protested Grace. "These hollow groans—there they go again!" and she clutched Amy's arm so

suddenly that a cracker and herring sandwich the latter was eating went to the floor.

Indeed there did sound through the deserted house a queer, groaning noise, as if some one was in distress. Betty gave voice to this suggestion, saying:

"Oh, girls, I wonder if any one can be—hurt?"

"Well, I'm not going to look!" cried Grace. "Oh, let's get away from this terrible place. I'd rather be out in the storm than here!"

"In that rain?" asked Mollie, as they listened to the down-rush of water. It even drowned the noise of the groans.

"That is only the wind," declared Mrs. Mackson, though she looked over her shoulder apprehensively. "The wind, moaning down an old chimney, or in some broken window, and around a corner—I have often heard it that way."

"You're a comfort, at least," murmured Betty. "But, girls, I really wonder if it could be anyone in trouble? Someone who took refuge in here from the storm, as we did, and who, wandering about, fell and got hurt. That girl, perhaps—the one from the tree——"

She paused, looking about for some support of her theory.

"Nonsense! How could she be here?" asked Mollie.

"Well, it's not very plausible," admitted Betty. "But some one is certainly in this place."

"Don't say that!" cried Grace.

"Don't be silly," advised Betty. "Why, of course some one is here, or has been here. Else how would that food get here? That is not ghostly, at all events. It was very material, and satisfying, and I'm deeply grateful for it. It stands to reason that some one expected to eat it.

"My theory is that some one, traveling perhaps like ourselves, only maybe not in an auto, was overtaken by the storm. More provident than we they had lunch with them, and brought it in here, intending to eat it. Then some accident happened to them, or——"

"The ghost carried them off," interrupted Mollie, with a glance of defiance at Grace, who shuddered, and looked behind her.

"Anyhow they're not here now," went on Betty. "And I don't know but that it is our duty to look for them."

"Never!" breathed Amy.

"At least we can go to the front door, and see if anyone is passing whom we can hail, and ask for help. If we could get a man, now——"

"Or even a good-sized boy," broke in Mollie.

"Yes, even a boy would do," conceded Betty. "We could get him to go with us into the other

part of the house. There was where all the manifestations seemed to come from."

"Well, let's go to the front door and look," proposed Cousin Jane. "That can do no harm, and really I don't like to think of anyone being in distress."

"Especially after we've eaten his lunch," put in Grace.

"How do you know but that it is a 'her' and not a 'him'?" asked Mollie.

"Nobody but a man would come in here—after dark."

"But we girls did."

"Oh, look how many of us there are. There is safety in numbers."

"Well, I wouldn't be here if there was any other place to go," declared Grace. "Come on, if we're going," and she moved toward the door, keeping close to Betty meanwhile.

"There must have been some one here, or else how did we see the light which we followed, and which brought us here?" Mollie wanted to know.

"That, too, may have been caused by the lightning," said Cousin Jane.

"You are bound to ascribe everything to nature," objected Mollie. "It's nice of you, but perhaps not correct."

"Well, you know that electricity does queer

things," declared the chaperone. "It might easily cause flickering lights, though I'm not saying but that some one has been here—the food proves that."

"Perhaps all the ghost is, after all, is lightning, or some tramp, who has made this his headquarters," said Betty. "Mr. Lagg would be glad to know that."

"We'll tell him," suggested Mollie. "It's a pity, while we are here, that we don't solve the mystery of the haunted house. Of course, strictly speaking, we are not in the mansion proper, but we could go there——"

"Don't you dare!" cried Grace.

They were going along the passage by which they had entered. The rain was not coming down so hard now, and the lightning and thunder were less frequent. The door was swinging to and fro on its hinges, swayed by the wind which blew in gusts up and down the passage.

Mollie was in the rear, carrying one lantern, with Betty in the lead with the other. They had almost reached the outer door, and were eagerly hoping they would see some friendly passer-by when a noise behind her caused Mollie to turn quickly. She saw a tall white object in a proverbially ghostly winding sheet. It had come from a side room.

The thing stretched out two white arms, and hands clutched themselves in Mollie's long hair, which had come loose and was hanging down her back in glorious tresses. Then a snarling voice cried:

"So you've come back; have you! Well, you won't get away from me again! Now you get in there!"

Mollie screamed. The others, adding their startled voices to hers, beheld the white figure catch the frightened girl by the arm, and thrust her into the room. Then the door was slammed shut, a key turned in the lock, while the white figure turned and fled down the passage, as a flash of lightning threw its ghostly outlines into weird relief, and a crash of thunder followed.

CHAPTER XVII

CONSTERNATION

THE other girls and Mrs. Mackson stood spell-bound for the moment, and then their senses came back to them, and they realized the need of acting at once.

"Mollie! Mollie!" cried Betty. "Where are you? What happened?"

She started back down the hall, but Grace caught her.

"Don't—don't!" Grace pleaded.

"But I must—I shall—Mollie—some one has taken her—thrust her into that room!"

"Yes—it was the ghost—I saw it!" Grace fairly screamed, "and they'll get you!"

"I don't care if they do! We must go to Mollie. Come, girls, to the rescue!" cried Betty, resolutely.

"But let us get some one to help us first!" insisted Amy. "We ought not to face that—that thing alone!" and she gasped, so rapidly was her heart beating.

"We're not alone!" insisted Betty. "There are four of us, to one—one man."

"How do you know he was a man?" demanded Grace.

"Didn't I hear him speak? It was a man's voice. Some man, for purposes of his own, is masquerading as a ghost, and he probably tried to frighten Mollie and the rest of us to keep up the reputation of the mansion for being haunted. If none of you are going back, I'll go alone!"

Betty started down the hallway, and her example was one of the things needed to infuse courage into the others. Not that Cousin Jane especially needed it, for she had already made up her mind, as had Betty, that something must be done, and that soon.

"Of course we must rescue Mollie!" the chaperone declared, emphatically. "Anyhow, that fellow ran away, after locking her in the room. Come back there."

Rather timidly, it must be confessed, they advanced until they stood before a door. There were several along the hall, opening into various rooms, apparently.

"It was here," said Betty.

"No, this one," declared Mrs. Mackson, indicating another opposite.

Betty turned to Grace and Amy.

"I was too frightened to look," admitted Grace.

"And I didn't see," confessed Amy.

"Well, there's one way to prove it—we'll call," spoke Betty. She raised her voice and cried:

"Mollie! Mollie! Don't be frightened. We haven't deserted you! In which room are you?"

They paused, waiting for what they expected would be a tear-choked answer, but none came.

"Mollie! Mollie!" cried Betty again, her tones trembling now.

Anxiously they waited, but there was no response.

"She isn't there!" gasped Amy. "Oh, Betty!" and she began to cry.

"Hush!" cautioned Mrs. Mackson. "Probably the poor child has fainted, and can't hear us. It's enough to make any one faint. But I'm sure this is the room," and she indicated the one she had pointed out. "We must break down the door and get her."

Not expecting the door to open, she turned the knob, but, to her surprise, the portal swung back, creaking on rusty hinges.

"The light—quick!" the chaperone called to Betty.

The remaining lantern from the auto—one being with Mollie—was flashed into the apartment. It took but a glance to show that it was empty.

"I thought it was this one," said Betty, trying to keep her voice from trembling, as she moved to the door she had insisted was the right one.

She tried half a dozen times. The door was locked.

"She's in—there!" gasped Grace.

Again Betty called aloud, repeating Mollie's name over and over again, but there was no answer.

"Oh—oh, what can have happened?" faltered Amy. "Poor Mollie!"

"At least we know that it was perfectly natural what happened—however mean and unjust it was," declared Betty. "We have to do with natural forces, and——"

Through the old house there once more sounded that mournful groan, chilling the very blood of the girls, and causing them to cling together. Several times were the groans repeated, and then there shone, as if from a distance, a bluish light, and there came the clank of metal.

"Oh—oh!" cried Grace.

"Quiet!" commanded Betty. "Mollie, are you in there?"

The storm had, in a measure, ceased now, and the only sounds from without was the falling of the rain.

"That—that couldn't have been thunder or lightning," said Betty, with a puzzled air.

"It was the wind—that is still blowing," insisted Mrs. Mackson. "Don't be frightened, girls. We must get Mollie out of that room. She has certainly fainted, and when she comes to she will be horribly frightened if we are not with her. Try the door again, Betty."

Betty did so, but it would not give.

"We must break it down!" decided the chaperone, resolutely. "Is there anything we can use?"

"There's a chair in that other room," said Amy, indicating the apartment they had looked in, only to find it untenanted. "We might use that."

"The very thing!" declared Mrs. Mackson. "We'll get it!"

She started for the other room, followed by the others, when Grace cried:

"Hark!"

They listened.

"What is it?" asked Betty.

"The sound of carriage wheels out in the road. And I heard a man's voice speak to his horse."

"Maybe it's the—one who caught Mollie, and he's taking her away," faltered Grace, who seemed to have a faculty of suggesting unpleasant possibilities at the wrong time.

"Then we must stop him!" cried Betty. She turned toward the front door, but a short distance away. The others hurried on after her, and saw, out in the road, the dim outlines of a carriage. There was a driving-light on the dashboard, and by its gleam the girls could make out the dark form of a man alighting.

"At least he's not—a ghost!" whispered Amy.

"Help! Oh, please help us!" screamed Grace.

"Hello, there! What's the trouble?" asked a pleasant voice. "I'll be with you in a minute. Whoa there, Jack, old man! Don't get uneasy. Show your light, please, so I can see where you are."

Betty flashed her lantern, and in its rays a man came up the weed-grown path. The girls were almost crying for sheer relief.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PRISONER

Mollie tumbled in a heap on the floor of the room, into which the white-robed figure had thrust her. She gasped once or twice, for her breath had grown short, not alone from fright—though she admitted that she was terribly scared—but from the rough treatment she had received. Then, as she endeavored to get to her feet in the darkness—for her lantern had fallen from her hand and been extinguished—she fainted, and fell back. Her heavy mass of hair, uncoiled and loose, served as a cushion, and so saved her as she crashed backward.

This much of Mrs. Mackson's theory was correct. Mollie could not answer the frantic calls of her chums, for she was insensible.

How long she remained in this condition she could not afterward tell, but it could not have been for long, since she was strong and healthy, and it was merely a case of overwrought nerves, and a severe mental shock, which did not amount to anything serious.

Poor Mollie heard the ringing of innumerable bells as if from some land beyond the clouds. Queer lights, even in the darkness, seemed to dance before her closed eyes. She felt a pressure, a sense of suffocation—this was the stagnant blood resuming its circulation.

Then consciousness returned so suddenly that it was painful. Mollie raised herself by leaning on her hands and murmured:

"Where am I? What happened? That figure in white—oh, and the girls—Betty—Grace—Amy!" she cried.

But none answered her, for by this time the others were outside watching that very welcome man approach.

Mollie waited, and then, as her thoughts arranged themselves in order in her brain, she began to plan what to do for herself.

"In the first place," she reasoned, "I am not seriously hurt. That fellow, whoever he was, just thrust me into this room. And it was no ghost, either," she went on, as she felt her arm, which she was sure had been bruised by the grasp of the mysterious one. "I'd better make a light, I think. Then I can see where I am. Oh, but what can have happened to the others? I hope he didn't get them, too!"

The thought was terrifying. She dismissed it.

Mollie was a practical girl, as must needs be one who drives an auto. She had pockets—a woeful lack with many—and matches.

It was the work of but a few seconds to set aglow the extinguished lantern, and how Mollie blessed the thought that had prompted taking both side lights with them. Otherwise she would have had to remain in the gloom. The lantern had not broken in the fall, and soon a cheerful glow made the room less gloomy, though it was a large apartment, and there were many flickering shadows, while the corners seemed in total darkness.

"But there's nothing there—can't be," decided Mollie, as she rose to her feet. "I just won't let myself be frightened."

Flashing the light about the room, the girl-prisoner made it out to be a large apartment, void of anything save a few broken sticks of furniture, and a litter of papers. The paper on the walls was mildewed and hanging in strips. There was a damp and musty smell in the place, but—joy of joys to Mollie—no rat holes. The floor was solid, and she could see no openings where the creatures might get in.

"So far—so good," she said aloud, and the sound of her own voice, in a measure, reassured her.

"I wonder had I better call again?" she thought. "Yes, it will be best."

And so she sent out a ringing cry for her chums. But the room had thick walls—the door was a solid one, and, as Betty, Amy, Grace and Mrs. Mackson were having a surprising time of their own just then, they did not hear the appeal.

"I'll have to depend on myself," thought Mollie. "Well, I can do it, I think!"

She paused a moment to gather her thoughts together, and, being a girl of method and order, she began at the beginning.

"In the first place, let me think how I got here," she mused. "Something in white grabbed me, and thrust me here. It was a very human touch—depart the ghost theory. I believe, after all, that Mr. Lagg was right—it is some one trying to make out that this place is haunted in order to get it for a lower price. The food supply proves that, I think.

"Anyhow, here I am—pushed in by some man masquerading as a ghost. That much is certain. And what was it he said, as he caught hold of me—'So you have come back!' That is all I remember. This would seem to indicate that I had been here before, and that he was either expecting me, or wanting me.

"A case of mistaken identity, at all events, for

I never should have come back, had I been here before, and that I was never here before is positive. Come, Mollie, we are getting on in this deduction business. Some one mistook me for some one else, and that shows that it is not really me who is wanted. That's good.

"Then, if that's the case, the sooner the mistake is discovered, and rectified, so much the better. I shall be released as soon as that queer man in the winding sheet discovers his error.

"And he ought to do it soon, for he seemed very anxious to get me back, and doubtless he will soon come to find out why I—or the person I am supposed to be—went away."

Then Mollie had another idea. She reasoned this out as she flashed the rays of the lamp about the bare apartment.

"But why should I wait for that man to come back?" she asked herself. "There might be trouble when he discovers that I am not the person he thinks me. He may be angry. And, though doubtless Betty and the others will do all they can for me, I had better see if I can help myself.

"Oh, isn't it all queer? The folks at home will never believe it when we tell them."

Mollie went quickly over the different happenings of the night, and tried to figure out a rea-

son for the various ghostly manifestations. That they were the work of some one endeavoring to depreciate the value of the property, she was certain.

"That man may have hired some girl who looks like me to help him," she thought, "and she may have become afraid, or worried, and left. Then I have to blunder in here, and in the dark he takes her for me. I'm sure that's it."

Then came a change of mood.

"But what is the use of speculating and guessing about it?" Mollie mused. "I had much better see if there is a way out. Oh, joy! A window—two of them!"

She approached the casements, realizing that as she was on the ground floor the sills could not be very high from earth. But though she saw that the catches on the frames were broken, and though she managed to raise one sash, it was with a jolt of disappointment that she saw the windows were heavily barred.

"A regular prison!" gasped Mollie. "This must have been a most peculiar house—barred windows. No wonder people shun it. Ugh! It gives me the creeps."

She flashed her lamp on the wooden sill, into which the iron rods were screwed. Then a wave

of hope came into her heart. She saw rotting wood and rusting iron. She pushed on one bar. It gave slightly.

"I can force them out, I'm sure!" she exclaimed aloud. "Oh, for something to use!"

Her light shone around the room—on a pile of broken chairs. She ran and grasped the leg of one. It was heavy and solid.

Mollie placed it between two of the bars, and pried. She was strong, and it did not take all of her muscle to force the ends of the rods from the rotting wood of the sill. A child might have done it. In a moment she had a space sufficiently wide to enable her to get out.

And then she heard a sound out in the road. It was a carriage being driven rapidly.

"Perhaps that man went for some vehicle in which to take me away!" thought the girl, aghast. "I had better not go out! What shall I do? My light! I must put it out, or he'll see me," and she turned the flame of the lantern down, leaving herself in darkness.

CHAPTER XIX

MYSTIFIED

"WHAT can I do for you? What seems to be the trouble?" inquired the man whom Betty and the others had hailed as they rushed to the door of the strange house, and peered out into the darkness.

"We're in a haunted mansion, and the ghost has taken Mollie away!" cried Grace, hysterically. "Please make him give her up. Oh, please do!"

But Betty paid no heed to her chum. Instead she exclaimed:

"Mr. Blackford! It's Mr. Blackford—the man who lost the five hundred dollar bill!"

"What!" cried Amy.

"I certainly am that same Mr. Blackford," answered the young man, "and if these aren't the Outdoor Girls, I miss my guess!"

"That's who we are—all but one of us," spoke Betty. "Oh, it's true. Some one has Mollie a prisoner here! We tried to open the door, but

it's locked. Will you come and help us try to batter it down?"

"I certainly will. But what are you doing here? Are you camping?"

"Camping in a haunted house? I guess not!" exclaimed Grace. "The idea! Oh, but it's good to have—a man!"

"Thank you!" laughed Mr. Blackford, who, it will be remembered, was so fortunate as to recover his lost money through the efforts of our heroines, as told in the first volume of this series.

"You—you aren't afraid; are you?" asked Amy.

"Afraid of what?"

"The ghost!"

"Ghost!" and he laughed heartily.

"Well, there really have been some strange goings-on here," said Betty, standing in the doorway with her chums. She looked out at the weather. It was not raining much now, and the thunder and lightning had about ceased.

"Suppose you explain," proposed Mr. Blackford. "I happened to be in this part of the country looking after some of my business interests. I was delayed longer at one place than I expected to be, and got caught in the storm. When I came past this house I thought I would

see if I could not be accommodated over night, for my horse was tired and needed stabling. Instead I——"

"You are appealed to to help lay a ghost and find a missing girl," broke in Betty. "But, oh, the last is most important! Please come and get Mollie out!"

"Yes, I guess that is the most important. You can tell me about it later. But I surely was astonished to meet you girls again—glad of it, though. Now for the prisoner. Lead the way, Miss Nelson."

Flashing her lantern, the other girls keeping at her side, and Cousin Jane bringing up in the rear, Betty advanced to the locked door. Mr. Blackford tried the knob, and then called:

"Stand back, whoever is in there. I'm going to burst this door open!"

Grace cried out.

"Quiet!" commanded Betty. "It is the only way."

Mr. Blackford placed his shoulder down near the lock. There was a cracking and splintering of wood, and the door suddenly flew open with a crash.

"Mollie! Mollie!" cried Betty, as she flashed the rays of her lamp inside.

But the room was empty! Mystified, the girls,

their chaperone and Mr. Blackford, stared about it. No Mollie was there!

"But I'm sure she was thrust into this room by that figure in white," declared Betty. "We all saw it."

"Are you sure?" asked Mr. Blackford, slowly.

"Positive. She was put in this room for some unknown purpose, and she can't have gotten out, for we have been in the hall all the while, and the door was locked."

"There is the window," said Mr. Blackford, as he took the lantern from Betty. Walking over to the casement he uttered an exclamation, as he saw the bent bars.

"This explains it!" he cried. "She has escaped!"

"Or else the—the ghost—came in here and took her away," faltered Amy.

"Well, we'll have a look about outside," suggested the young man. "There may be marks that will aid us, especially as the ground is soft now."

They all went outside. The rain was but a mere drizzle now. The fury of the storm had passed, and the night was becoming calm. The old house, and the mansion beyond it, which could now be seen dimly back of a fringe of

trees, was silent and seemingly deserted, even by the ghost. There were no more queer blue flames, no more hollow groans and clanking noises.

"I didn't think to look and see if the other auto lamp was in that room where poor Mollie was," said Grace. "Did you?"

"Yes," spoke Betty. "I looked. It was gone."

"We had better not all go under that window at once," suggested Mr. Blackford, as they neared the casement with the bent bars. "Let me go alone, with the light, and I'll see if I can make out any footprints."

Carefully he examined, and then he gave a joyful exclamation.

"It's all right!" he cried. "There are the marks of but one person's shoes, and they are your friend's, I'm sure—for they are small. It plainly shows where she let herself down out of the window."

"Oh, how glad I am!" cried Betty. "But where is she now? Can you tell which way she went?"

"Only for a short distance," answered Mr. Blackford, as he flashed the rays of the lamp to and fro. "Then comes grass, and I am not sufficiently good on the trail to track a person

over grass. However, we are sure of one thing —that she got out of the room herself, and ran off. She was not carried away."

"That is everything," murmured Grace. "Oh, what a relief!"

"But where can she be now?" asked Betty, in bewilderment. "Why did she not come back to us?"

"Probably she thought you, too, had left the place," suggested Mr. Blackford. "We must make further search. But suppose you tell me all that happened. I am interested in this— ghost."

The girls told all that had occurred—told it in gasps—by exclamations—by "fits and starts," as Betty expressed it. At first Mr. Blackford was amused—then he was more interested—finally he was impressed.

"I don't like this," he said, when he had been informed of the failure of Mr. Lagg to dispose of the property because of the "ghostly" manifestations. "It looks to me as though some trick was being perpetrated here. Possibly something more than a trick. There may be crimes contemplated. The authorities should be notified.

"Of course I don't believe in ghosts—neither do you—and, from what you say, it must have

been a very human one who caught Miss Billette. But she is our most important consideration now. We must find her! We must search outside, for clearly she is not in the house, though it will do no harm to take another look."

"Go back there!" cried Grace, aghast.

"Why not?" asked Betty, coolly. "You forget we have a man with us now."

"Certainly we'll go back there and look," spoke Mrs. Mackson, in business-like tones. "Though I don't believe Mollie would go back, unless it was to look for us. And how can she have gone in without us seeing her?"

"There may be many entrances to an old, rambling place like this," said Mr. Blackford. "It will do no harm to look about in it again, and then we can search up and down the road."

Rather gingerly the girls entered the old house again. The light was flashed in all the rooms downstairs, but the girls balked at going to the upper floors, though Mr. Blackford proposed it.

"Mollie would not go up there," said Betty, positively.

"Perhaps not," admitted Mr. Blackford.

"I think we ought to go back to where we left the auto," said Mrs. Mackson. "That would be the most likely place for Mollie to go."

"I agree with you!" exclaimed the young

man, quickly. "We'll go to the stalled auto."

As they were leaving the place there burst upon them a shrill, weird cry, like that of some animal, and it was followed by that deep groan that vibrated through the vacant rooms.

"The ghost! The ghost!" cried Grace, clutching Mr. Blackford's arm.

CHAPTER XX

SEEKING THE GHOST

THEY all stood still for a moment. The eerie noises gradually died away, and then they all became conscious of a strong smell of sulphur.

"What is that?" asked Betty, in an awed whisper. She was more impressed than she had been.

"Smells as if some one had lighted old-fashioned brimstone matches," answered Mr. Blackford.

"And it isn't the lightning, now," spoke Amy, looking at Mrs. Mackson. "It's the—ghost."

"A very material ghost, in my opinion," said the young man, who had so providentially come along. "I'm going to find out who it is."

He started toward the passage that led to the mansion.

"Don't you dare leave us here alone!" cried Betty, half tragically. Mr. Blackford looked at her a moment, and then added quietly:

"Well, perhaps it will be better to postpone the investigation. And there is your missing friend. But I would like to know who has an

object in doing this. I think Mr. Lagg would like to know, also."

Once more the mysterious house was in silence, and with a last look around at the mildewed walls, the girls and Mrs. Mackson preceded Mr. Blackford out of it.

"I'll get your secret yet!" exclaimed the young man, as he turned to look at the strange habitation. "Now, where did you leave the auto?"

Fortunately, Betty had a good sense of direction and could lead the way, flashing her lamp at intervals. Mr. Blackford had proposed that some of the girls wait while he drove one of them to the stalled car in his carriage, it holding but two. But the girls refused to consider this, wishing to stay together.

"And, too," said Betty, "we might miss poor Mollie on the way."

"That is so," he had agreed. So they tramped along the muddy road, making the turn on to the main highway, and then, when Betty was about to remark that they must be near the car, Grace cried out.

"Oh, what is it now?" demanded Betty, a trifle sharply, for her nerves were fast giving way under the strain, though the Little Captain had good nerves, ordinarily.

"There's a light!" exclaimed Grace.

"Yes; and it's at the auto!" added Amy. "Oh, girls——"

"Perhaps it is Mollie," suggested Mrs. Mackson. "Call to her."

"Mollie! Mollie!" Betty cried, shrilly, and the others joined in with a school call.

"Oh, are you there?" came back the answering hail. "Oh, I am so glad."

"That's Mollie!" said Betty, in great relief. "We are united again," and presently the girls were clasping the lost one in their arms, and, let the truth be told—weeping over her for very joy.

"But of all things—to see you!" exclaimed Mollie, to Mr. Blackford, as she fastened her auto lamp on the bracket.

"Yes, and I was surprised to find your friends. But how did you get here?"

Mollie told how she had come to her senses, and had lighted the lamp she had with her. Then, when she was about to escape through the barred window she had heard the sound of a carriage approaching.

"That was mine," said Mr. Blackford.

"If I had known it I would not have been so frightened," remarked Mollie. "As it was, I put out my lamp, and then, when no one came

for me, I decided to jump out. It was not far to the ground. Then I ran, and at first did not know what to do. Then I decided to try and find my auto. I must have blundered into the road, but I got here at last. I was going to hide in the car, and I wanted to leave some sort of a light on it so no one would run into it in the dark."

"But didn't you hear us talking and calling?" asked Amy.

"No," answered Mollie. "You see the room is some distance from the front of the house. And I was too frightened to know what I was doing. Besides, I fainted, at first, you know. And I thought you girls would run when—when you saw that white thing that grabbed me. I was disappointed when you were not at the auto here."

"What was—what was it that grabbed you?" faltered Amy, in awed tones.

"You needn't be so mysterious about it," laughed Mollie. She could laugh now—the strain was over. "It was a man who grabbed me, I'm certain of that. And a man I have seen before!"

"Seen before!" cried Betty. "What do you mean? Who was he?"

"I don't know. But what I do know is that

he had a queer scar on the hand that grabbed me. And somewhere—I can't recall now, I'm in such a flutter—I've seen that man and his scar before."

"Try to think," urged Mr. Blackford. "We must get at the bottom of this outrage, and if you can give us a clue it will help a lot."

"I can't think now," protested Mollie, weakly. "Maybe it will come to me later. Oh, what a night! If only our auto would work we could get to—some place."

"Suppose you let me have a look," suggested Mr. Blackford. "I know something of the mechanism of a car."

"Oh, if you can only get this one to—mote!" sighed Mollie.

Mr. Blackford proved that he did know considerable about a car, for he soon discovered that the trouble was a simple disarrangement of the ignition system.

"There!" he exclaimed, when, by the light of a held-up lantern, he had made the necessary adjustment. "We will see if it won't go. Of course you can't use the self-starter, since your storage battery is out of order, but we can crank up in the old-fashioned way."

"The car generates its own current when it is running," said Mollie. "But to-day I have been running on an extra battery, as something

seemed to be the matter with the other one. I must have it looked to."

Mr. Blackford whirled the crank, and at once there sounded the welcome throb of the powerful motor.

"Oh, joy!" cried Betty. "Now we can go!"

The auto was indeed in running order again.

"What are your plans?" asked the young man.

"We'll go on to Wendell City, the next town, and stop there for the night," said Mollie. "We are very damp and miserable, and need rest, and——"

"Food!" said Grace. "That little lunch we had was not very substantial."

"There were no chocolates for Grace," spoke Amy.

"I think I will drive on to the next town also, since it has stopped raining," went on Mr. Blackford. "I will see you in the morning, and we'll talk over this business some more. I want to lay that ghost if we can. You'll get to the town ahead of me in your car."

"And we'll see you at the Lafayette House," suggested Mollie. "We are going to stop there."

Four weary and much exhausted girls, and a rather used-up chaperone, were soon enjoying the comforts of the hotel. They had 'phoned on

ahead for rooms that morning, but the proprietor had about given them up. However, it was only eleven o'clock.

"Wouldn't you think it was—next day?" asked Betty, as she noted the time.

"A great deal happened in a short space," said Mrs. Mackson. "Oh, but it is good to be in a house again."

"One that isn't haunted," added Grace.

Morning, as Betty put it, "dawned clear and bright," and with it came refreshment to the Outdoor Girls. They almost forgot the terrors of the night, and when Mr. Blackford met them in the parlor, he having arrived about an hour after they did, he found a very different set of young ladies.

"Well, are you ready for the ghost hunt?" he asked, with a smile.

"I am!" declared Mollie. "I think that ought to be investigated. The authorities should be notified, not so much for what happened to me—to all of us—as because of what might happen to others. Then there's poor Mr. Lagg—he'll lose what money he put into that property if the value goes down because of the ghosts. I say let's try to discover the secret."

"I'm with you!" exclaimed Betty, and Amy and Grace gave rather halting assents. Mrs.

Mackson gamely agreed to do as the rest did.

"I did hope I could go with you to-day," said Mr. Blackford, "but I have received a telegram that calls me away. I wonder if you could postpone it?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Betty. "There is no great hurry, and besides, I think we will all be the better for a rest. Is your business prospering, Mr. Blackford?"

"Yes, indeed, thanks to the way you girls helped me out by finding my five hundred dollar bill. But this is not business. I don't mind telling you that I am seeking for a long-lost relative—a sister—and I have engaged a firm of private detectives to look for her. They just sent me word that they are on the track of a person who may be the one I have been looking for so long. So, under the circumstances——"

"Oh, of course, go by all means!" exclaimed Mollie. "We can meet you later, anywhere you say."

"Then suppose we meet here, say a week from to-day, and try for the ghost secret. By that time I may have found my sister, or have suffered another disappointment—and there have been many of late," and he sighed.

The week that followed was a busy one for the Outdoor Girls. Mollie had her car put in

perfect order, and they toured over many miles of splendid country. They had minor happenings and adventures, but nothing of moment, if we except a few punctures and a blowout. Oh, yes, they did run over a dog, breaking the creature's leg. But it was the dog's fault, and Mollie steered out of the way so quickly that she nearly sent the auto into a tree.

At the appointed time Mr. Blackford was at the hotel.

"Well, are you ready to go ghost-hunting?" he asked.

"We are!" cried Mollie, and once more they set off for the "haunted mansion," determined to discover its secret if at all possible.

"I wonder what we'll find?" said Betty, as the car raced on.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MISSING GIRL

"WHO would ever think we could be frightened here?" asked Mollie.

"Yes, it's quiet enough now," replied Betty. "Not a sign of a ghost."

"Nor flashes of blue fire," added Grace.

"Nor hollow groans," remarked Amy.

The Outdoor Girls, with Mrs. Mackson and Mr. Blackford, had reached the so-called "haunted mansion." The day was a sunny one, perhaps that added to the lack of nervous fears they felt as they stopped the auto, and entered the place. This time they had gone to the mansion proper, having driven through what were once beautiful and extensive grounds. But they had long since fallen into a tangle of weeds and shrubbery.

They had decided to explore the mansion itself first, and go from there to the annex, as it might be called—the former abode of the housekeeper and staff of servants the rich Mr. Kenyon once kept.

During the week that had intervened, the keys of the place had been secured from Mr. Lagg. He was delighted that the girls had finally consented, through a chain of circumstances, to investigate the queer manifestations.

"You'll do better than the boys, I'm sure," said the storekeeper. "Anyhow, they've gone camping. Now find out what that ghost is, and —get it out of there. I have received word from the doctors who want to use the place as a sanitarium, that if I cannot, within a week, deliver them the property with a guarantee that there will be no disturbances, they will take another place."

"We will do all we can," promised Mollie.

They entered the old mansion. Truly it had been a magnificent place in its day, and even now the hand of decay had touched it but lightly. With a few repairs, some decorating, a cutting down of the trees that were too thick about the place, it could be made into a most cheerful sanitarium.

"And it's so big!" cried Grace, as she wandered about the spacious rooms. But she had hold of Amy's arm, it might be noticed, and both girls kept rather near to Mr. Blackford He had come back unsucessful in his search for his sister.

"Yes, it must have been fine here when the place was new," agreed Mollie. "Well, let's go at this search systematically."

"That is the only way," spoke Mr. Blackford. "We might start in at the top and work downward."

They did this, ascending by means of the grand staircase to the second floor, and thence to the third and fourth. The latter contained but few rooms, mostly for storage, it seemed, and it was soon evident that no ghost—of the human kind at least—had been at work here. The dust and grime of years had accumulated in the apartments.

The third floor offered no solution. This was rather larger in extent, and contained many guest-rooms. Some showed evidence of having been beautifully decorated, being paneled in tapestry that now hung in shabby strips—a relic of former beauty.

It was not until the second floor was reached that anything like a promising clue was found. Meanwhile many queer nooks and corners had been explored. Mr. Kenyon had evidently built the house after his own eccentric ideas, for it contained strange rooms, connecting with one another by little, unexpected passages, short flights of stairs, and many winding ways. Some

of the rooms might well have been secret ones, so strangely were they tucked away.

But in two apartments on the second floor—two rooms that had evidently been choice guest chambers—the searchers came upon signs which indicated clearly that some one had been in them recently. There was less dust, and in one corner was a pile of bags and rags that seemed to indicate a bed. On the hearth—there were big fireplaces in each room—were ashes that had been hot not many days gone by.

"Tramps!" exclaimed Mr. Blackford. "To my way of thinking tramps have been sleeping here."

"Do you think the ghost was a tramp?" asked Mollie. "The one who caught me?"

"He may have been."

"But why was he all in white?"

"Probably to keep up the illusion. We haven't gotten to the bottom of this yet. Let's keep on."

But aside from the two rooms no others in the big mansion showed signs of habitation. All were gloomy and dust-encumbered. On the first floor nothing was discovered, and the cellar yielded no clues.

"Well, all we have established so far," said Mr. Blackford, "is that someone has been sleeping here. Now let's keep on to the annex, and

see if we can establish a connection. It may be that the secret is there."

They found the passage that led from the mansion to the house in which so much had happened to them that stormy night. There was a room in the main house, whence the passage began, and this room, too, showed signs of having been used recently.

And when they came to the place where the girls had dined so unexpectedly they saw unmistakable signs that other meals than the one they had helped themselves to had been eaten there.

"Our friend, the ghost, has been here since," said Mr. Blackford. "Perhaps we shall have to set a trap for him."

They walked on, their footsteps echoing and re-echoing through the silent old house. They were in the annex now, but a search there revealed nothing.

The girls looked at one another, and then at Mr. Blackford. He shook his head.

"I confess I am baffled," he said. "I did hope to find something. But we haven't come across it. If there was a systematic effort to give the impression that this mansion was haunted, there would have been some evidences of it.

"I mean we would have some material evi-

dence. There would have to be some way of producing that bluish light, that groaning sound and the clanking of metal. But, unless the apparatus is more cleverly hidden than I suspect, it isn't here."

"Then the only thing to do is to give it up, and confess ourselves beaten," suggested Betty.

"I don't like to do that," spoke Mollie.

"Well, we can go over the place again," remarked Mr. Blackford slowly, "but I don't see——"

He paused abruptly and seemed to be listening. The girls glanced at one another curiously.

Then there sounded through the house a cry as of fear, and it was followed by a heavy fall that jarred the floor.

Mr. Blackford sprang to the door, rushed down the hall, and a moment later cried:

"Girls, come here!"

"Have you—have you found the ghost?" asked Betty.

"No, it's a girl, and she seems to have fainted."

"A—a girl!" faltered Mollie.

They all ran to where Mr. Blackford's voice sounded. It was in the very room where Mollie had been held a prisoner. And there, in the center of the apartment, supported in Mr. Black-

ford's arms, was a girl. At the sight of her Betty cried:

"It is she! It is she! It is the girl who so strangely ran away from us. The one who fell out of the tree! Carrie Norton!"

CHAPTER XXII

A SWINDLED FARMER

SURPRISE at Betty's exclamation held her companions silent for a moment, and then Mollie cried:

"Are you sure, Betty? Are you sure? Can it be possible that we have found her again?"

"Of course I'm sure!" declared Betty, as she advanced to assist Mr. Blackford in caring for the girl, who lay white and senseless in his arms. "You'll be sure, too, as soon as you take a good look at her. Isn't that hair evidence enough?" and she let some of the girl's luxurious tresses, that had come unbound, slip through her fingers. "And see her face—and there's the scar she got when she fell from the tree. Of course it's the same girl!"

"I believe it is," murmured Grace. "But how came she here?"

"Another one of the mysteries to be explained," said Amy. "But hadn't we better see first if we can revive her?"

"An excellent idea," declared Mrs. Mackson. "If one of you will get some water, I'll use my smelling salts on her. And we must loosen her collar. It seems too tight."

Mr. Blackford had turned over the care of the girl to the others. He hurried to a spring they had discovered in the yard of the old house, and presently handed in a tin of water.

The strange girl opened her eyes, looked about in fear, and then, seeing herself surrounded by the friendly faces of our girls, on her own countenance there came a look of relief.

"What—what happened?" she gasped. "Oh, I remember. I fainted. I heard someone in the house, and I thought it was—I thought he was coming for me. Oh, he isn't here; is he?"

"We don't know who you mean," said Mollie, gently.

"My—the man who calls himself my guardian, but who has used me very cruelly," she said. "I ran away from him, and then I learned that there might be a way to escape him forever. I came back to get certain papers—but I heard noises in the old house, and——"

"I guess we made the noises," said Betty, with a smile. "We were looking for a—ghost!"

"A ghost!" cried the strange girl, starting up.

"There! I am sorry I said that!" exclaimed Betty, who thought, too late, of the effect it might have on the overwrought nerves of the stranger. "But really there isn't any ghost, you know."

The girl smiled weakly.

"Take some more water," urged Mrs. Mackson. "And smell these ammonia salts."

"I'll go get some of that cold chocolate in the vacuum bottle," volunteered Grace.

"No, please," said the girl. "I shall be all right presently. I can go on. I didn't find the papers I wanted. I was sure he had hidden them here."

"We hope you won't go until you have told us a little something about yourself," said Betty, with an inviting smile. "We don't want to pry into your private affairs," she went on, "but we would like to help you. And please don't disappear so mysteriously again. You are the girl who fell out of the branches of a tree; aren't you?"

"Yes," and she smiled faintly, "I am Carrie Norton. I knew you as soon as I saw you all again. Oh' please don't think harshly of me, but I have been so worried I did not know what I was doing. I have always regretted repaying your kindness so shabbily, but really——"

"Now don't worry a bit about that!" broke in Mollie. "Just rest yourself, and when you feel able, tell us all you wish to, and we'll do all we can for you. Do you feel better?"

"Oh, yes, much. I am not given to fainting. It was just fright that made me call out when I heard the noise you made, and then I went over —all got black before me. Oh, I am feeling stronger every minute."

She proved it by getting up, and the girls helped her arrange her dress, dusting it for her, and aiding her in coiling up her heavy hair.

"What lovely braids you have," observed Grace.

"Do you think so? They have made trouble enough for me."

"I suppose so much hair must be inconvenient in warm weather, but most of us would be willing to put up with it," spoke Amy.

"I didn't mean it that way. I will tell you soon. But I ought to be going."

"Then come with us," invited Betty. "We have plenty of room in the car, and we can take you to your friends, to a hotel, or anywhere you like to."

"And we can take you to our homes," added Mollie. "We have not far to go, and, as we are only touring for pleasure, we have no schedule

to upset. Come with us. We have finished our ghost hunt."

"Then let us get away from here before my guardian happens to come back," suggested the girl. "I will explain all I can to you, though it is rather complicated."

"Would you mind explaining first," asked Betty with a smile, "why you were up that tree? We have all puzzled over that so much."

"I went up there to hide from my guardian, or the man who calls himself such," said the girl. "I suppose it seems strange, but really that was the only thing I could think of. And it was not hard to get up, for the branches were low. You see I had just run away from him, from this very house, when he brought me here, and said that it was to be our home."

"This place your home!" exclaimed Mollie. "Why I thought Mr. Lagg had bought it."

"I don't know Mr. Lagg," said the strange girl, with a shake of her head. "But I'll explain in sections, as it were. My name is Carrie Norton, and my guardian is Samuel Clark. At least, that is his right name. He goes by several, according to the nature of the business he is in."

"He must be a queer sort of man to change his name," suggested Mr. Blackford, who had rejoined the girls.

"He is queer," agreed Carrie Norton, "and not altogether honest, I fear. To be brief, when my parents died, several years ago, he assumed charge of me. He had been associated with my father in business, and he said the will provided that he was to be my guardian. I was too grief-stricken to question that, but I was shocked when, instead of having a comfortable fortune, as I supposed, there was little or nothing, and Mr. Clark said I must go about the country with him, helping him sell goods. He was a sort of commercial traveler, dealing in different things at different times."

"Yes," said the girls.

"Finally we came to this section, and one day he came to this house. He said he owned it, and that we were to live here. I saw that it was deserted, and I made up my mind I would not stay. The very next day, when he was making preparations to remain over night, I ran away. Oh, I was so lonely. I did not care what became of me. Then I thought I saw him coming down the road after me, and I went up in the tree.

"Perhaps I was foolish, but I scarcely knew what I was doing. I guess I must have fallen asleep, for I was in a comfortable position, and I had lost much rest of late. Then I heard an

auto horn—I thought all sorts of things—I awoke with a start, and fell out."

"Then our auto did not strike you?" asked Mollie.

"No, I was just stunned by the fall. When I woke up, and found myself in that farm house bedroom, I did not know what to think. One idea possessed me, that I must get away—that I would not go back to him—my guardian. So I slipped away, and I have been wandering about ever since. I managed to get enough office work to help support me, for I am a business college graduate and I had a little money of my own with me. Sometimes I stopped at hotels, and again at boarding houses. My one idea was to keep away from that man."

"And you dropped part of a letter; did you not?" asked Grace. "The day you ran from the farm house."

"Yes," Carrie admitted. "I had written one I intended leaving for—for that man. Then I decided not to and I tore it up just before I got out of the window. I suppose I must have dropped a piece. It was a letter saying I would never come back to Shadow Valley."

"How did you happen to come back here?" asked Mollie. "We were certainly puzzled at your sudden departure."

"A little while ago," resumed Carrie, "I read something in a paper referring to my case. It was a legal notice asking for news of my whereabouts, and saying I would hear of something to my advantage by calling on certain lawyers with papers to prove my identity. At first I feared this was a trap on the part of my guardian, but I inquired and learned that the law firm was a reputable one. There is a Mr. Allen Washburn connected with it."

"In Deepdale?" cried Betty, her cheeks flaming.

"Yes. But how did you know?" asked Carrie.

"Oh, I am—slightly acquainted with Mr. Washburn," said Betty, hesitatingly.

"Slightly—is good," murmured Grace.

"So I decided I would go see those lawyers," went on Carrie. "But first I wanted the papers. My guardian had them, but I recalled that the day we came here he placed them on the mantle in this room. I came back to get them, but they were gone, and then I heard a noise—I fainted—and, well, here I am, and you are here too, I see."

"It is quite a mystery," said Betty. Now, I have this to propose. You come home, with us, and we will take you to Mr. Washburn, or have

him come to see you. Perhaps he can dispense with the papers."

"Oh, I hope so!" Carrie cried. "If only I could have a new guardian, I might be happy."

"Well, let's start on the road to happiness," said Mr. Blackford, with a smile. "We haven't found the ghost, but perhaps it is just as well."

"Did you ever see any queer manifestations while you were here?" asked Mollie of the girl.

"I was here only part of one day," she said. "I am glad it was not dark—I should have been afraid. Oh, it must have been terrible for you to have been caught by—by that man!" she said to Mollie. "Who could he have been?"

"I am just wondering if it could have been your guardian," said Mollie, a strange look on her face. "He said something about me having 'come back.' Girls, I'm sure that was it!" she cried. "He took me for Carrie, with my long hair——"

"We are coming on!" cried Mr. Blackford. "We will soon have this mystery solved."

"What sort of a looking man was the one who caught you?" asked Carrie.

"I could not see—he had on long white garments."

"Well, let us get under way. The lawyers will be the best ones to settle this affair," resumed

Mr. Blackford, as he started for the waiting auto.

They left the strange mansion behind. Whether it was "haunted" or not they had failed to establish. But they had gotten on the trail of another mystery.

It was while autoing toward the town of Franklin, on their way to Deepdale, that the girls saw on the road a farmer standing beside a carriage with a broken axle. The man was ruefully contemplating the damage.

"Can we help you any?" asked Mollie, as she stopped her car. Mollie was always glad to help people.

"Wa'al," said the man slowly, "if you had a new axle it would be a help. But I know you haven't. What riles me most though, is that the rascal will get away from me."

"Are you after some one?" asked Mr. Blackford, catching at the man's words.

"Yes, I am; after as slick a swindler as has been around these parts in a long time. He done me out of a bunch of money not long ago, and only a little while ago I got word that the same man is peddling stuff in Franklin. I hitched up, as soon as I could, intending to go to Franklin and have him arrested. But this pesky axle had to break, and now I can't go on. It's

the only rig I have, too. I heard that the fellow intends to go out on the noon train. Then I may never hear of him again."

"Can't you telephone?" asked Mr. Blackford.

"There's no 'phones around here, and if I did it would be hard work to hold him. There'd have to be a warrant, and I'd have to swear to a complaint. My mere word over the wire wouldn't be enough, I'm afraid. And it's near noon now. I don't know what to do."

Ruefully he gazed at his disabled carriage.

"I have it!" cried Mollie. "Come in the auto with us. We have room for one more, with a little crowding. We can get you there before noon, and perhaps you can have the man arrested."

"Good!" cried the swindled farmer. "I'll do it!"

CHAPTER XXIII

"THAT'S THE MAN!"

"WHAT will you do with your horse and carriage asked Mr. Blackford, when the girls had made different seating arrangements to accommodate Mr. Bailey, the farmer. "It won't do to leave it on the road; will it?"

"No, I'll have to fix that some way. We can't very well take it along with us. But here comes Jim Bates. He'll look after my nag for me. Hi, Jim!" he called as a man came driving past in a dilapidated wagon, drawn by a bony horse, "Jim, jest look after by outfit; will you? Maybe you can leave it in Pierce's barn until I come back. That isn't far. Pierce is away, but his wife will let you, I guess."

"Where you goin'?" asked Jim. His horse had stopped of its own accord, it seemed.

"Goin' in to Franklin."

"In that there machine?"

"Yep."

"Gittin' sort of stylish; ain't ye?"

"Mebbe. But I had an accident, and these young ladies was kind enough to offer me a lift."

"In a hurry?"

"I sure am. I'm after that swindler. Heard he was in Franklin."

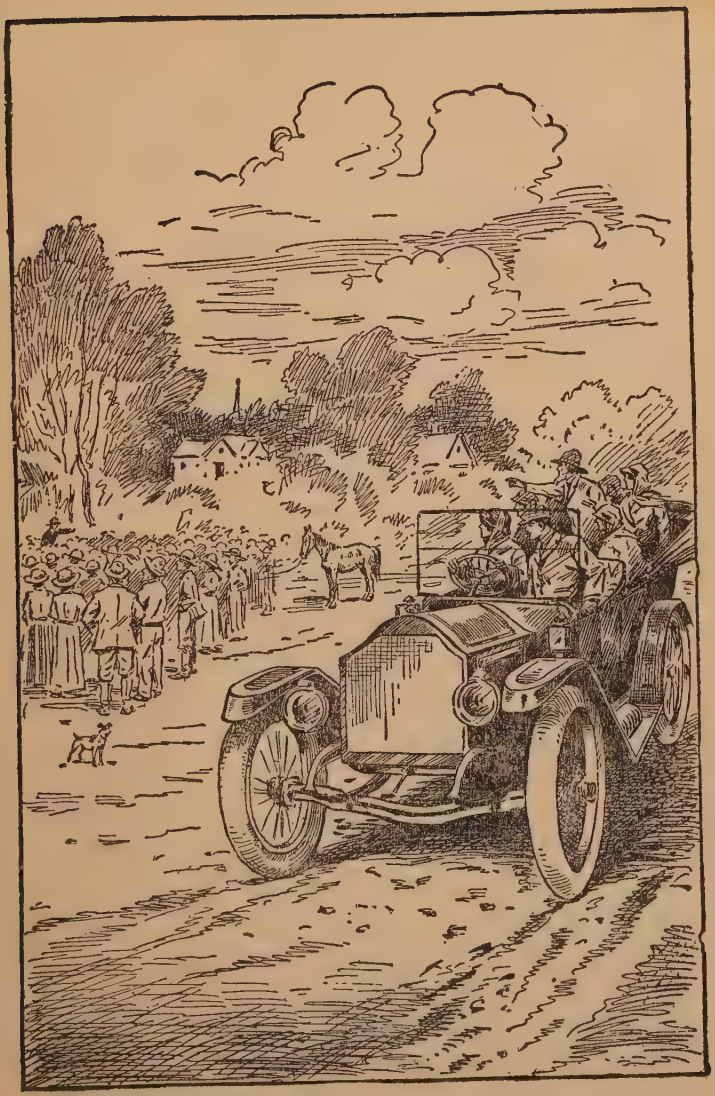
"Git out! Feller that sold you the interest in that patent soap?"

"Yep. That's how I was swindled," he explained to our friends. "This faker come along with a wonderful soap. It would take the spots out of everything—even the sun, he said. It did do good work when he manipulated it. Well, I was foolish enough to give up some of my hard-earned savings for the secret of how to make the soap. I bought the stuff he told me, but the soap was a failure. He swindled me. Now I'm after him."

"I hope you catch him," said Jim. "Go along in the buzz-wagon. I'll look after your rig until you git back. Good-luck!"

They started off, the farmer going into details of how he had been swindled. He was very thankful for the unexpected "lift" given him, and declared that he would not have known what to do had not the auto come along.

"We are only too glad to help you," said Mollie.



"'THERE HE IS!' CRIED THE FARMER, 'THAT'S THE MAN WHO SWINDLED ME!'"

"We seem to be in the assisting business," remarked Betty, who sat beside Mollie. "We're helping two birds with one auto."

"You mean Carrie?"

"Yes."

"Poor girl! I do hope we can help her, and get someone to look after her so she won't worry. Mr. Washburn will know what to do."

"Yes, Allen is getting to be quite a lawyer," admitted Betty, with a bush.

The swung into Franklin.

"Where do you think would be a good place to look for your man?" asked Mr. Blackford of the farmer.

"I heard he was selling tooth powder in the public square. He has a stand, or something."

"Then suppose you head for there," suggested Mr. Blackford to Mollie. She nodded.

They saw a crowd of people in the square in front of the court house. In their midst stood a man on a raised platform—a platform gay with flags. His strident voice could be heard extolling the merits of his wares. The auto came nearer. The vendor's face could be plainly seen.

"There he is!" cried the farmer. "That's the man who swindled me!" He stood up in

the machine. Those in the crowd gazed wonderingly at him.

A gasp from Carrie caused Grace to look at her. The girl's face was white.

"What is it?" asked Grace in alarm.

"That man—he—he is my guardian!" cried Carrie. "Oh, don't let him see me!" and she cowered behind Amy and Grace.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FAKER CAUGHT

SEVERAL things happened at about the same time, and so quickly that the girls confessed afterward that they were fairly dizzy. Consequently they were not altogether sure of the sequence of events themselves.

But as that does not so much matter as does the ultimate effect, I will set down the various happenings in such order as will best indicate to the reader the proceedings.

Naturally the attention of Mr. Blackford, and the girls, was first drawn to Mr. Bailey, the farmer, who was shaking his fist at the man selling tooth powder on the platform. His announcement that this was the man he sought was sufficiently dramatic.

Then came Carrie's startled cry. Betty and Mollie turned around to look at her.

"Are you sure he is the man who called himself your guardian?" asked Mollie. "Don't make any mistake."

"I am not making a mistake," murmured Car-

rie, still holding herself behind Amy and Grace. "He is that horrid man! Oh, don't let him see me!"

"What, have you a case ag'in him, too?" asked Mr. Bailey.

"She thinks so," explained Mr. Blackford. "We've got to act quickly here. Go up a little closer, Mollie."

A lane was opened for the auto, amid the crowd. The faker stopped in the midst of the "patter" concerning his wonderful powder, which "would make the teeth like unto the milky pearls of the Orient."

The man on the platform turned pale, and then a sort of sickly green color spread over his face. He had caught sight of the farmer standing in the auto. Perhaps he also had had a glimpse of Carrie Norton. At any rate he said:

"And now, my dear people, I must leave you. This is the last chance you will have to purchase Tuckerman's Tooth Tester at this price. I thank you one and all for your attention, and for your patronage. I must leave at once. I have been summoned by telegraph to attend a conference of the International Dental Society, who wish to purchase the secret of my wonderful invention. I will bid you good-day," and he started to descend from his platform.

"No, you don't!" cried Mr. Bailey. "No, you don't get away like that! The dental society kin wait until you pay me back the money you swindled out of me on that soap deal! Hold him, somebody, until I kin swear out a warrant. I've caught you, old fellow!"

The faker kept his nerve. He came down from the platform carrying his valise. The The crowd was around him.

"Good people, let me pass!" he cried, authoritatively.

Mr. Blackford sensed the danger. The man might get away after all.

"Here!" he called to a constable in the crowd. "That man is a swindler! He should be arrested."

"I haven't any warrant," answered the officer, weakly.

"You will have one in five minutes!" said Mr. Blackford. "I tell you to hold that man. Mr. Bailey, get to the nearest justice of the peace as soon as you can. Swear out a warrant and have it brought here. Officer, arrest that man!"

There was something more than disinterested authority in Mr. Blackford's tone. The constable worked his way through the crowd.

"Good people, let me pass!" Let me pass!" the faker was saying. "I have to catch a train!"

"Not much you won't! If I have to hold you myself!" muttered Mr. Bailey, angrily.

"You get to that justice as fast as you can," directed Mr. Blackford. "We'll hold this man, if we have to chloroform him!"

The farmer jumped from the auto, and hurried off, a dozen hands pointing out the office he desired in the court house. The constable reached the tooth powder vendor.

"You're under arrest!" the officer said, laying a hand on the man's arm.

"Don't you touch me! Under arrest? On what charge?"

He shook himself loose, and stroked his beard nervously, also his luxurious hair, but this time it was black, instead of white—dyed obviously.

"On the charge—on the charge," began the constable nervously. "You're arrested on a charge that's soon to be here. Now don't make any fuss, but come along with me."

"I decline to go with you unless I know what I am charged with!" shouted the faker. "You let me go, or it will be the worse for you!"

Mollie arose in her place at the steering wheel.

"He's arrested on the charge of assault and battery!" she called in her fresh, strong voice. "I make the charge, Girls!" she exclaimed, turning to the others, "that's the man who thrust

me into that room, and locked me there. That's the ghost. I recognize him by the scar on his thumb!"

The crowd was in an uproar as the constable caught hold of the man, and quickly snapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists.

Then as the girls in the auto stood up, the better to see, Carrie was revealed. The faker, closely held by the constable who had arrested him, and by a brother officer who had hurried up, gave the strange girl one look. Then those who were near him heard him mutter:

"I guess the game is up!"

CHAPTER XXV

EXPLANATIONS

BETTY furnished the next sensation. As the man in charge of the officers passed near the auto, poor Carrie cowering away from him, though he no longer had it in his power to harm her, the Little Captain exclaimed:

"Girls! Girls! He's the old hair doctor—the man we met with the gay wagon—Bennington's Restorer!"

"Who is?" demanded Amy.

"That man—the one they have arrested. He's the one we gave the bolt to."

"Ha! That settles it!" cried Mollie. "That was where I first saw the scarred thumb! It's all working out now! I didn't remember at first. His hair is black instead of white."

"Dye," murmured Grace. "It is he all right!"

The farmer came hurrying through the crowd with the justice to whom he had gone to make a complaint. Above his head he waved a paper, crying:

"I got it! I have the warrant. Now Mr. Faker, which ought to be your name, you'll spend the rest of the summer behind the bars, on this charge."

"Yes, and with another added to it," perhaps," said Mr. Blackford, with a glance at Carrie.

The faker, which it is easier to call him, as he went by many names, shrugged his shoulders philosophically. He saw that he was caught. Perhaps he had been in the toils of the law before this.

He was quickly taken to the court house, where he was held on the farmer's charge under such heavy bail that it was not produced. This insured him being retained in custody.

"And now to attend to your case, Miss Norton," said Mr. Blackford, when Allen Washburn had been telegraphed for, and promised to come. "So he was your guardian; eh?"

"Yes, and since the girls recognize him for what he was part of the time—a seller of hair tonic—I will explain a little further. He made me pose in his cart, before the crowds, as one whose hair had been restored and made long by his worthless stuff. Oh, it was shameful! That is why I ran away from him!"

"I don't blame you," said Mollie. "And did his stuff do your hair any good?"

"I never used a drop of it! Neither did he. It was trash! He used to make me shake down my hair before the crowd, and then he would tell how I used to have none at all, but by using his medicine it came. I always had nice hair, before I ever met him! Oh, I can't forget it!" and she sobbed a little.

"Never mind," said Betty, gently, "it is all over now."

And it was, as far as any further charge the faker had over Carrie Norton. Allen Washburn came on with the papers in the case. It seems that a distant relative of the girl, learned in a round about way that Clark, or Bennington, to use but two of his names, had forged certain documents in order to make it appear that he was her legal guardian. This gave him control of Carrie, and her money, a tidy sum left by her father. The girl he compelled to accompany him on his vending trips, but when he went into the making of worthless hair restorer and obliged her to pose as having benefited by it, she finally rebelled.

This distant relative, wishing to aid the girl, took the matter up with a law firm, happening to hit on the one where Allen Washburn was employed. The newspaper advertisement was inserted, and at last had its effect.

The facts in the case were presented to the court after the faker's arrest, and the judge lost no time in deposing him as Carrie's guardian. He was obliged to give up the money he had wrongfully retained, and Allen Washburn was, much to Carrie's delight, appointed to look after her affairs.

"You'll be all right now, my dear," said Mollie, when the court action was over.

"She will be, if Betty doesn't get jealous!" said Grace, with a laugh. "Oh, I didn't mean anything!" she added quickly, as she saw her chum frown. "Have a chocolate!"

Bennington, or Clark—the faker, to be brief —was thus held by the law. In view of the other charges against him, Mollie did not press hers.

"It would only bring you into unpleasant notoriety," said Mr. Washburn. "He will get a severe enough penalty as it is."

"He must have mistaken you for me," said Carrie, as they talked over the thrusting of Mollie into the room. "Seeing you in the house whence I had fled, and with your hair hanging down, he made a natural mistake, thinking I had come back to him."

"Except that my hair is nothing like as lovely as yours, my dear."

"Oh, yours is fine, I think. But the dim light might have deceived him."

"But why should he dress up all in white—like a ghost?" asked Grace.

"Probably to play that part," suggested Betty. "That is one point we haven't solved—how the ghostly manifestations were brought about. I wish we could have solved that for the sake of Mr. Lagg."

"I fancy it is solved," said Mr. Blackford, with a smile. "It was the faker, all the while."

"It was?" cried Mollie. "Did he do it on purpose?"

"No, he had no intention of being a spook, but he could not have done it better had he planned it. I have been talking to him," and Mr. Blackford nodded in the direction of the court house. "He made a clean breast of everything when Allen hinted that it might have a good effect when he came to be sentenced.

"It seems that he manufactured his hair-tonic in the haunted mansion. It was necessary to heat it in a sort of furnace, and this made the groaning sound you heard, it was caused by air pressure. Sometimes it groaned and again it shrieked as the hot air rushed from the ventilator."

"And the clank of the metal?" asked Grace,

not without a look over her shoulder, though it was broad daylight.

"That was when he stirred the stuff in the brass mixing kettle."

"What about the queer blue light, and the smell of sulphur?" asked Cousin Jane.

"That was the burning of sulphur which he used in the preparation. Sulphur is often used in hair-tonics I believe, though I don't know that this man used it to any advantage. At any rate he burned it, making the ghostly flashes of blue fire, and the smell. The flashes were reflected from the room where he worked into the smaller house, by the big window panes."

"But why did he dress like a ghost?" asked Mollie.

"That was a big white garment he put on to avoid soiling his colthes when he made his hair-tonic mixture. And he really did mistake you for Carrie, Mollie. He admitted as much, and asked to be forgiven. It was his lunch you ate. He had prepared for a long stay in the house."

"Well, I guess we won't bother to pay for it," said Betty. "He's made trouble enough. Then the mansion isn't haunted, after all?"

"No, and never was. It was simply the making of his hair-tonic there nights that produced the effect. He says he never even knew that the

doctors who were to buy the place were frightened away, and the night you girls stopped there he thought you had, as was the case, taken refuge from the storm. He did not know he had frightened you, but when he saw Mollie he made a rush for her, thinking she was his ward, come back. He locked her up, intending to come for her later, when he had taken off the furnace some of his boiling mixture."

"Then Mr. Lagg can sell his property after all!" exclaimed Grace. "I'm so glad!"

And so was the poetical store keeper himself, when he heard the news. He composed on eight-line verse on the subject, and insisted on rewarding the girls, saying it was due to their efforts that the "ghost was laid." He received a substantial sum for the old mansion, which was turned into a sanitarium.

"And, now that all the explanations are explained," said Mollie a day or so later, "we may as well resume our tour. What do you say, girls?"

"Fine!" cried Betty. "And we'll take Carrie with us. She needs a change, and traveling around will benefit her."

"Though I traveled considerable after I ran away from that horrid man," said the girl, with a smile at her new friends.

"There is one regret," spoke Grace, "and that is that Mr. Blackford didn't find his missing sister."

"I had some hopes that you might prove to be she," he said, looking at Carrie. "However, I have not yet given up the prospect of finding her. I am going to seek farther."

"Let's go for a long ride, anyhow, and then we can plan what to do for the rest of the summer," suggested Mollie, and the girls went off in the car.

And what occurred further to the chums may be learned by reading the next volume of this series, to be entitled "The Outdoor Girls in a Winter Camp; Or, Glorious Days on Skates and Ice Boats."

"And so there is no haunted mansion after all," remarked Betty, as they rode on.

"Are you sorry?" asked Grace. "I'm not."

"Well, a haunt is so—romantic," spoke Betty. "But I suppose it is just as well."

Eventually the false guardian was sent to prison for a long term, on several charges. Mr. Bailey was not the only farmer he had swindled, it appeared. The fellow had unexpectedly come to the old mansion, and had boldly decided to use it for his purposes, learning that the title was in dispute. It just suited his needs, and the hair-

tonic was not the only nostrum he made there after Carrie ran away. But the tonic was alone responsible for the queer sounds and manifestations. On leaving the mansion to go about peddling his wares, the man would take his apparatus with him in the wagon, so there were few signs of his occupancy.

Mr. Blackford bade the girls farewell a few days after the explanations had been made, saying he was going to look up a new clue regarding his sister. Carrie Norton was made welcome at the home of Betty, though she often stayed for weeks at a time with the other chums. She had income enough to support her now that her fortune was restored to her.

The girls completed their tour, having many good times which the boys and the twins shared, the latter never forgetting to ask, semi-occasionally:

"Has oo dot any tandy?"

And now that the Outdoor Girls have a prospect of "living happily ever after," we will take leave of them.

THE END.

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